

Elections and Racial Power

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An electoral choice of ten different fascists is like choosing which way one wishes to die.

– George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*¹

In Europe and former European settler colonies, when one is close to elections one is rarely far from racism. The move to the far-right in the European elections of June 2024 demonstrates that racism continues to matter in elections.² It also reminds us of the intimate ties between racism and democracy. Racism, after all, has made many electoral victories possible. Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party did not become racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic after garnering popular support, but deployed anti-Semitic and racist sentiments to consolidate power, including by exploiting the electoral system. Fascism, racism, and elections still operate in tandem today. When I complain to my Sicilian grandmother about the Giorgia Meloni-led neofascist government that runs Italy, my grandmother, assuming that fascism is antithetical to democracy, insists that it has nothing to do with the current Italian government. Yet, today as in the past, fascism thrives under democracy and remains fundamentally tied to capitalism, imperialism, and racism.

At the same time, George Jackson argues in *Blood in my Eye* (1972) that fascism is not static:

1 George L. Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1990 [1972]), 72.

2 On the election results see Ella Joyner, "Europe's Far Right Won Ground in the EU Elections. Can They Unite to Wield Power?" AP News, June 11, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/european-parliament-election-far-right-b9339cf1a7d2067bf6fa1941c166936d>.

We will never have a complete definition of fascism, because it is in constant motion, showing a new face to fit any particular set of problems that arise to threaten the predominance of the traditionalist, capitalist ruling class. But if one were forced for the sake of clarity to define it in a word simple enough for all to understand, that word would be “reform.”³

Jackson was a staunch critic of *both* fascism and elections, viewing the latter as incompatible with revolution, to which he dedicated his life. When he was nineteen years old, Jackson was given an indeterminate sentence of one year to life for stealing seventy-one dollars from a gas station, and spent eleven years in prison, seven of them in isolation.⁴ During these years, Jackson continued writing, organizing, and theorizing the making of a revolution in the United States, until a guard killed him in San Quentin prison in California in 1971 at the young age of twenty-nine. It was the racist U.S. state, then, that made Jackson a revolutionary who opposed reform. Elections, we cannot forget, are precisely in the business of reform. Committed to their own reproduction while delivering promises of social change, many electoral parties and candidates, both in Europe and in the neocolonies, continue to routinely exploit racism, anti-Blackness, and popular discontentment to garner consent, showing that racism remains a powerful tool of social control to this day.

In Italy, the rise of the Lega Nord (Northern League) is emblematic of the strategic function that racism and anti-Blackness continue to play in many elections.⁵ In the 1990s, the Lega Nord built its constituency in the North by targeting Southern Italians, depicting them as lazy, corrupt, and generally inferior to Northern Italians.⁶ In the process, the Lega Nord mystified the fact that the so-called 1861 unification of Italy was a violent annexation that the North imposed upon the South, from which it extracted wealth, labor, and resources.⁷ Despite its anti-Southern sentiments, the Lega Nord eventually gar-

3 George L. Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 118.

4 See George L. Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994 [1971]).

5 Marzia Milazzo, *Colorblind Tools: Global Technologies of Racial Power* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2022), 263–4.

6 Michel Huyseune, “Come interpretare l’Altro: Il Mezzogiorno nel discorso della Lega Nord,” *Meridiana*, 63 (2008): 175, 179.

7 Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971), 71; see also Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question*, trans. Pasquale Verdichio (New York: Bordighera Press, 2015), 16.

nered votes in the South and became a majority party in the Italian government in 2018. To achieve this, it redirected its racist propaganda towards Black migrants and refugees, while it renamed itself La Lega, strategically dropping the term “Nord” from its name.

Anti-Blackness, packaged in the colorblind language of immigration, has operated as a nation-building tool in Italy, where Northerners and Southerners have united over targeting Black people, while Southern Italians no longer face institutionalized discrimination in Northern Italy.⁸ Speaking volumes about the ongoing power of racist and anti-Black propaganda masked as cultural nationalism, Southern Italians have thus been easily coopted into supporting a party that does not have our interests at heart. The strategies that La Lega used, of course, are not new. Neither are they confined to Europe, as white elites in Panama, for example, also used racism, anti-Blackness, and anti-immigrant propaganda in the early twentieth century to divide the working classes, gain popular consent, and propel a nation-building process that benefitted the white minority.⁹

In May 2024, general elections in South Africa also pushed the country further to the right. For the first time since the inaugural democratic elections of 1994, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) lost the majority, while the neoliberal Democratic Alliance (DA) consolidated its position as the main opposition party. On June 30, South Africa’s president Cyril Ramaphosa announced the creation of a Government of National Unity, which sees the ANC entering a coalition with the DA and other political parties, including the pro-Afrikaner far-right party Freedom Front Plus (FFP).¹⁰ Even as the ANC has long moved away from its originally socialist values towards a neoliberalism that has pushed most citizens further into poverty, the coalition government clearly is no good news for Black people. Rather, it will likely lead South Africa further towards nonracialism and neoliberalism in a country where white people, who

8 By “colorblind language” I mean language that is not explicitly racialized, while it seeks to achieve racist effects. On the Lega Nord and nation-building in Italy, see Milazzo, *Colorblind Tools*, 263–264.

9 For an analysis of how white elites exploited racism and anti-Blackness to garner consent in early twentieth century Panama, see Milazzo, *Colorblind Tools*, 57–80.

10 South African Government, “Meet SA’s New Cabinet,” SAnews, June 30, 2024, <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/meet-sas-new-cabinet>.

are merely seven percent of the population, continue to own over seventy percent of the land.¹¹

What Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko said over fifty years ago thus remains relevant in post-1994 South Africa. Asked by a European journalist in 1977 whether he envisioned a democratic South Africa as a socialist society, Biko answered:

Yes, I think there is no running away from the fact that now in South Africa there is such an ill distribution of wealth that any form of political freedom which does not touch on the proper distribution of wealth will be meaningless. The whites have locked up within a small minority of themselves the greater proportion of the country's wealth. If we have a mere change of face of those in governing positions what is likely to happen is that black people will continue to be poor, and you will see a few blacks filtering through into the so-called bourgeoisie. Our society will be run almost as of yesterday.¹²

Biko's words have been prescient given that in post-apartheid South Africa de facto there has been "a mere change of face of those in governing positions" so that the country is "run almost as of yesterday." Black people today are even poorer than during apartheid, while white people are collectively richer.¹³ This makes sense as assets grow in value over time, and the South African constitution protects private property (and therefore white property). It also speaks to how, as Jackson writes, independent African countries "which allowed capitalism to remain are still neo-colonies."¹⁴ This neocolonial condition affects every facet of society. Black people in South Africa have an abysmal life expectancy, which *decreased* from sixty years in 1985 to a shocking forty-nine years in 2004.¹⁵ The South African government nonetheless has stopped collecting

11 Mandisi Majavu, "Laundering Racial Capitalism in Post-apartheid South Africa," *Politikon* 50, no. 3 (2023): 209–223, 216.

12 Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like: Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 149.

13 Martin Legassick, *Towards Socialist Democracy* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007), 506.

14 Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 4.

15 Gerrit Rooks and Leon Oerlemans, "South Africa: A Rising Star? Assessing the X-effectiveness of South Africa's National System of Innovation," *European Planning Studies* 13, no. 8 (2005): 1205–1226, 1210.

life expectancy statistics disaggregated by race, merely stating in the 2022 census that life expectancy is sixty-five years for women and sixty years for men.¹⁶

Many South African politicians exploit the abject conditions of poverty in which most Black South Africans live, as the unemployment rate for Black people is close to fifty percent, while for white people it is ten percent.¹⁷ Illustrating how anti-Blackness and racism in South Africa function as tools of social control used against Black people themselves with the complicity of the Black elite, local elections in the last decade have seen the frightening growth of overtly xenophobic political parties, such as Action SA led by Herman Mashaba, who is an admirer of Donald Trump.¹⁸ Xenophobia in South Africa is best described as Afrophobia given that it specifically targets Black immigrants, who are accused of stealing jobs from South Africans and bringing crime into the country.¹⁹ It is a xenophobia that excludes white people, even as we continue to possess what Biko called “the natural passport to the exclusive pool of white privileges.”²⁰ In deflecting attention away from white wealth and towards convenient scapegoats, Afrophobia sustains white power in South Africa.

In the United States, the ongoing presidential electoral campaign has also seen the exploitation of racist sentiments for the benefit of whiteness, as Trump is again using anti-immigrant propaganda to gain votes. Trump said during the presidential debate of June 27, 2024:

The fact is that [Biden's] big kill on the Black people is the millions of people that he's allowed to come in through the border. [Immigrants are] taking Black jobs now – and it could be 18, it could be 19 and even 20 million people. They're taking Black jobs, and they're taking Hispanic jobs, and you

16 South African Government, “People of South Africa,” gov.za, <https://www.gov.za/about-sa/people-south-africa-o#birth>.

17 Statistics South Africa, “Statistical Release P0211: Quarterly Labor Force Survey, Quarter 4: 2022,” Quarter 4, 2022, <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02114thQuarter2022.pdf>, 42–43.

18 See Niall Reddy, “South Africa Has Not Been Immune to Right-Wing Populism,” Jacobin, March 1, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/03/south-africa-right-wing-populism-anc-eff-ethno-nationalism>.

19 On Afrophobia in South Africa see Zamansele Nsele, “Framing Afrophobia as the ‘Swart Gevaar’s’ Doppelgänger in Gerald Machona’s Afrofuturistic *Vabvakure* (People from Far Away),” in *The Imagined New (or, What Happens When History is a Catastrophe?) – Volume I: Working through Alternative Archives: Art, History, Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Anthony Bogues et al. (Johannesburg, Lagos, Bayreuth: Iwalewa Books), 186–203.

20 Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 65.

haven't seen it yet, but you're gonna see something that's going to be the worst in our history.²¹

Trump here attempts to garner both Black and Latinx votes by predictably depicting immigrants as threatening competitors on the labor market, relying on an old and transnational racist strategy.²² He has also tried to manipulate Black voters by depicting himself as a victim of the criminal justice system.²³

In this context, we cannot forget that racist tactics enabled Trump to win the 2016 elections. In his Republican nomination speech, delivered in July 2016, Trump targeted Black people and undocumented immigrants, falsely depicting the United States as a country engulfed by racialized violence and crime.²⁴ Trump criminalized Black people by deploying colorblind language as he portrayed cities with a significant Black population, such as Baltimore and Chicago, as emblems of violent crime.²⁵ More overtly targeting undocumented Latinx immigrants, who cannot vote, Trump argued that “illegal immigrants with criminal records ... are tonight roaming free to threaten peaceful citizens.”²⁶ That undocumented immigrants in the United States contribute *billions* in taxes did not prevent Trump from depicting them as a burden on the economy and as a threat to the racialized working classes, whose interests are certainly not represented by the Republican party.²⁷

The fact that Trump continues to deploy explicitly racist tactics to gain votes does not mean that he is the sole locus of racism in this electoral campaign. The

21 Trump cited in Ja'han Jones, “Trump’s ‘Black Jobs’ Comment was a Lowlight in His Fact-Free Debate Performance,” MSNBC.com, June 28, 2024, <https://www.msnbc.com/the-reidout/reidout-blog/trump-black-jobs-2024-debate-rcna159521>.

22 See Milazzo, *Colorblind Tools*.

23 Lalee Ibssa, Gabriella Abdul-Hakim, and Soo Rin Kim, “Trump Claims Black Americans Relate to His Criminal Prosecutions,” ABC News, February 24, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/trump-claims-black-americans-relate-criminal-prosecutions/story?id=107509919>.

24 Milazzo, *Colorblind Tools*, 262.

25 Ibid.

26 Donald Trump, “Transcript: Donald Trump at the G.O.P. Convention,” The New York Times, July 22, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/us/politics/trump-transcript-rnc-address.html>.

27 On the taxes paid by undocumented immigrants in the United States, see American Immigration Council, “Fact Sheet: Adding Up the Billions in Tax Dollars Paid by Undocumented Immigrants,” April 4, 2016, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/adding-billions-tax-dollars-paid-undocumented-immigrants>.

upcoming U.S. elections might appear to involve two very different candidates and parties, yet U.S. voters are again choosing between two versions of white supremacy. While Joe Biden and Donald Trump called each other “racist” during the 2024 campaign, these mutual accusations obscure the fact that racism is institutionalized in the United States and will remain a structural feature of the U.S. American state no matter who wins the presidential elections.²⁸ In this context, it is telling that institutional racism also thrived during Barack Obama’s presidency.²⁹

Further sustaining structural racism, Biden has continued to exploit fears of crime to fund the genocidal U.S. police. Biden’s “Safer America Plan” includes funding for an additional 100,000 police officers.³⁰ Under the current administration, the U.S. government spent \$135 billion on police in 2021 alone, with this money overwhelmingly going to salaries and benefits.³¹ At the 2022 State of the Union Address, Biden renewed his commitment to extend policing by stating: “We should all agree the answer is not to defund the police. It’s to fund the police. Fund them. Fund them. Fund them with resources and training. Resources and training they need to protect their community.”³² Here, Biden reproduces the myth that the police exist to “protect their community,” while the U.S. police was created to protect white property and white people from the legitimate demands of the racialized working classes.³³ As Micol Seigel writes, “any analysis of U.S. policing must consider its constitutive relationship to the

28 Brakkton Booker, “Trump and Biden Campaigns Call Each Other ‘Racist’ as They Seek to Court Black Voters,” *Politico*, May 23, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/05/23/biden-trump-racism-television-ads-black-voters-00159745>.

29 See Bettina L. Love and Brandelyn Tosolt, “Reality of Rhetoric? Barack Obama and Post-Racial America,” *Race, Gender, and Class* 17, no. 3–4 (2010): 19–37.

30 White House, “Fact Sheet: President Biden’s Safer America Plan,” The White House, August 1, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/08/01/fact-sheet-president-bidens-safer-america-plan-2/>.

31 Urban Institute, “Criminal Justice Expenditures: Police, Corrections, and Courts,” n.d., <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/state-and-local-finance-initiative/state-and-local-backgrounders/criminal-justice-police-corrections-court-s-expenditures>.

32 Joe Biden, “Full Transcript of Biden’s State of the Union Address,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/us/politics/biden-sotu-transcript.html>.

33 On the history of the U.S. police, see Sam Mitrani, *The Rise of the Chicago Police Department: Class and Conflict, 1850–1894* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

racialization of Black and brown subjects, not only theoretically but also in history, with the U.S. police's structural formation as an antiblack force.³⁴ The U.S. police remains an anti-Black force today.

While Biden continues to pump money into the police, police killings rise in number each year in the United States, where cops killed 1,163 people in 2023 alone.³⁵ As of May 27, 2024, of the 469 people killed by the police, 159 were white, which is thirty-three percent of the victims of police killings, even though white people make up sixty-one percent of the U.S. population.³⁶ This means that the U.S. police continues to inordinately kill Black people and people of color, who are also disproportionately incarcerated. In 2020, Black people were imprisoned at five times the rate for white adults in the United States.³⁷

Biden's withdrawal from the 2024 presidential campaign and his endorsement of vice president Kamala Harris has been met by media outlets arguing that, "With Harris, Democrats would bet against US history of sexism, racism."³⁸ Indeed, Harris has been the object of racist attacks that predictably question her "political skills and competence," attacks which further show that racism and anti-Blackness are alive and well in the United States, where many might refuse to support a Black woman as president.³⁹ Far from being a passive victim of racism, however, Harris herself contributed to bolstering structural racism during her twenty-seven years as a "tough-on-crime" prosecutor in the state of California.⁴⁰

34 Micol Seigel, *Violence Work: State Power and the Limits of Police* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 21.

35 Statista, "People Shot to Death by U.S. Police 2017–2024, by Race," Statista, June 6, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/585152/people-shot-to-death-by-us-police-by-race/>.

36 Ibid.

37 Pew Charitable Trusts, "Racial Disparities Persist in Many U.S. Jails," May 16, 2023, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2023/05/racial-disparities-persist-in-many-us-jails>.

38 USA Today, "With Harris, Democrats Would Bet against US History of Sexism, Racism," July 22, 2024, <https://www.usatoday.com/videos/news/politics/2024/07/22/kamala-harris-democrats-bet-against-us-history-sexism-racism/74493264007/>.

39 Christina Greer, "The Real Reason a Kamala Harris Presidency is Unfathomable to Her Critics," MSNBC, July 11, 2024, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/kamala-harris-dei-president-racist-sexist-comments-rcna161043>.

40 Michael Finnegan, "California's Tough-on-Crime Past Haunts Kamala Harris," Los Angeles Times, October 24, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2019-10-24/kamala-harris-california-crime>.

As vice president, Harris has maintained an inhumane stance on immigration, famously affirming during her 2021 visit to Guatemala, “If you come to our border, you will be turned back.”⁴¹ Over 37,000 migrants have been detained in the United States as of July 14, 2024.⁴² During the 2020 presidential campaign, Biden promised to halt for-profit immigration detention centers. Yet as of 2023 more than ninety percent of immigrants held by U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) were locked up in private facilities, with the private prison company GEO Group having increased its revenues by forty percent to a record \$1.05 billion.⁴³ The criminalization of immigration remains a racialized issue in the United States, where Black immigrants, for example, are subjected to discriminatory treatment, including arbitrary detention, higher bonds, and excessive use of force.⁴⁴

Voter suppression also remains deeply racialized and anti-Black in the United States. In 2016, over six million U.S. citizens were deprived of the right to vote because of felony convictions.⁴⁵ While there are state differences, voter disqualification based on felony convictions are common throughout the United States.⁴⁶ No other democracy in the world disenfranchises for life people who have already served their sentence. White supremacists used felony disenfranchisement to prevent Black people from voting after the Civil War,

41 BBC, “Kamala Harris Tells Guatemala Migrants ‘Do Not Come to US,’” June 8, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57387350>.

42 TRAC Immigration, “ICE Detainees,” [trac.syr, n.d., https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/detentionstats/pop_agen_table.html](https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/detentionstats/pop_agen_table.html).

43 Ted Hesson, Mica Rosenberg, and Kristina Cooke, “Biden Vowed to Reform Immigration Detention. Instead, Private Prisons Benefited,” Reuters, August 7, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-vowed-reform-immigration-detention-instead-private-prisons-benefited-2023-08-07/>.

44 Human Rights First, “Anti-Black Discrimination within US Immigration, Detention, and Enforcement Systems,” September 2022, https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/CERD-1pger_Anti-Black-Discrimination-within-US-Immigration-Detention-and-Enforcement-Systems-1.pdf.

45 Christopher Uggen, Ryan Larson, and Sarah Shannon, “6 Million Lost Voters: State-Level Estimates of Felony Disenfranchisement, 2016,” The Sentencing Project, October 2016, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/08/6-Million-Lost-Voters.pdf>.

46 The Sentencing Project and Human Rights Watch, “Disenfranchisement in Other Countries” under “Losing the Vote: The Impact of Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United State,” Human Rights Watch, October 1998, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports98/vote/usvot98o-04.htm>.

for example through Mississippi's 1890 constitution.⁴⁷ This same constitution is still in place today, and recent attempts to change it have failed. In the last thirty years, over 55,000 people in Mississippi have lost the right to vote; six out of ten disenfranchised people in the state are Black.⁴⁸

Disenfranchisement thus clearly remains a method of racialized social control in the United States. At the same time, Black radical and Afropessimist thinkers teach us that elections are not a solution to racism and much less to anti-Blackness. As mentioned in the opening of this essay, elections are about reform, and reform, as Anthony Farley writes, "is a mode of repetition."⁴⁹ Moreover, Jackson said the following about elections: "When any election is held it will fortify rather than destroy the credibility of the power brokers. When we participate in this election to win, instead of disrupt, we're lending to its credibility, and destroying our own."⁵⁰ Jackson insists that elections sustain, legitimize, and naturalize the power of the state. In the United States, a country built on the genocide of Indigenous people and the enslavement of Black people, elections are meant to support the anti-Black and racist status quo rather than disrupt it. It is not simply a matter of abolishing the racist Electoral College or recognizing that a two-party system can hardly be considered democratic, but to contend with the fact that elections are antithetical to abolition. The state will never let people vote on its own destruction!

I hear the questions: Are you advocating for dictatorship? What else is there beyond democracy? Such questions reveal a profound lack of imagination and demonstrate that we can barely think beyond the structures of the nation state. And yet, for Black people, the nation state is no safe haven. Rather, as Rinaldo Walcott writes, "for Black subjects ... settlement is impossible; citizenship is a mirage; and the nation-state is the site of our deepest estrangement and our deaths."⁵¹ The nation state provides no protection for Black people. Anti-Blackness, too, thrives under democracy.

47 Daja E. Henry, "How Mississippi's Jim Crow Laws Still Haunt Black Voters Today," The Marshall Project, April 4, 2024, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2024/04/04/mississippi-voting-rights-history-disenfranchisement>.

48 Ibid.

49 Anthony Farley, "Toward a General Theory of Antiracism," in *Antiracism*, ed. Moon-Kie Jung and João H. Costa Vargas (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 82–105.

50 Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 26.

51 Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Black Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 50.

In the United States, there is an obsession with elections and hegemonic ideology which contends that voting is an ethical practice in itself or even a duty. However, Frank B. Wilderson invites us to rethink the presumed ethicality of voting within a system put in place to maintain racism and anti-Blackness. Wilderson states:

One thing that everyone is forgetting is that the only way that voting could actually be an ethical practice is if, say, every Indian had 22 votes and every black had a vote and everybody else sat back.... Having other people vote makes ... pulling the lever an unethical act.⁵²

Every time we are concerned with the outcome of a specific election, we forget that U.S. elections, to return to Jackson, “strengthen the credibility of the power brokers.”⁵³ The electoral power brokers in the United States are committed to the reproduction of capitalism and the reproduction of their own class, a class that is dependent on the death and exploitation of Black people, regardless of who is running for whatever office. While we do not yet know whether the Democratic or Republican candidate will win in November, we can be sure that the elections will bring yet another victory for anti-Blackness and white supremacy.

52 Omar Ricks and Frank B. Wilderson. “‘Knowing Oneself to Be a Dead Relation’: A Review Essay and an Interview with Frank B. Wilderson III (Continued Part 2 of 2),” n.d., https://cosmichoboes.blogspot.com/2015/08/knowning-oneself-to-be-dead-relation_12.html.

53 Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 26.

