

The 'triadic' model of society in Somers' *Genealogies of Citizenship*

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1. Introduction

The standard criticism on the left of neoliberalism, whose ideological core is what Somers aptly calls 'market fundamentalism', is that it harms the economic interests of most people and is bad for the overall functioning of the economy. On the one hand, market fundamentalism leads to a rejection of the affirmative state and thus the massive under-provision of a wide range of public goods; on the other hand, weakly regulated markets generate sharp increases in inequality, environmental destruction, risky speculative behaviour and economic volatility. In the end, the argument goes, market fundamentalism is both bad for the well-being of most people and bad for the capitalist economy itself.

That is the standard criticism. Margaret Somers adds a critical additional argument: market fundamentalism is deeply corrosive of the foundations of citizenship. The argument is subtle and powerful. Citizenship, she argues, is not simply a question of formal rights inscribed in the legal rules of the state. Effective citizenship also depends upon a process of social inclusion as a member of a social and political community, for without such inclusion there can be no robust mechanism for translating formal rights on paper into substantive rights in practice. The core of her argument, then, revolves around an investigation of the conditions for sustaining such inclusive social membership, and the key to understanding this problem, she argues, is understanding the relationships among the state, the market and civil society. The basic punchline of the analysis is that market fundamentalism weakens civil society by undermining reciprocities and solidarities, contractualizing human relations and making social inclusion dependent upon successful participation in market transactions. The result is a transformation of citizenship itself, from an unconditional status of membership to a contingent accomplishment. Increasingly, a significant proportion of people who are formal citizens in the USA become effectively stateless persons, equivalent in Somers' analysis to the stateless refugees after World War II.

These are compelling arguments which I find interesting and broadly persuasive. There are, however, a number of theoretical issues in the conceptual framework used in the analysis that I think are underdeveloped or, in some cases,

unsatisfactory. In particular, I want to interrogate what Somers refers to as the *triadic model* of state/market/civil society for understanding the effects of market fundamentalism. In my own work on what I call ‘real utopias’ (see Wright, E. O. (2010) *Envisioning Real Utopias*, New York and London, Verso) I have adopted a very similar triadic model of the macro-settings of social practice, but there are some differences in the way I have formulated these categories and their interconnections and the way Somers approaches them. Some of these differences may be more differences in rhetoric than in substance, but nevertheless I think it would be useful in engaging Somers’ arguments to bring into focus these differences and explore their possible ramifications. I will also, at the end of these comments, say something more narrowly about the specific analysis Somers proposes concerning the effects of market fundamentalism on racial inequality.

2. The triadic model

Somers proposes that we analyse the complex processes through which citizenship is constructed with a model that differentiates three spheres of social practices—the state, the market and civil society.¹ These domains are not hermetically sealed, autonomous domains, but rather interact in systematic ways. In particular, she is concerned with the ways in which the market potentially undermines the reciprocities in civil society and how the state, if it engages in a range of social protections and market regulations, can help sustain a vibrant civil society. She writes:

[A] healthy civil society is not autonomous of markets and states. Indeed the contrary is true; civil society’s very capacity for resistance against external market incursions requires support from the state in the form of market regulations, social insurance policies, public services, redistributive tax schemes and legal mechanisms to institutionalize and enforce the rights to livelihood. (p. 31)

I want to comment on four features of her elaboration of this model:

- (1) The nature of the spatial metaphor used to think about the three spheres.

¹A brief terminological note: there are many different words one can use to label what is being differentiated by terms such as state, market, civil society. Sometimes these are called spheres, other times domains or sectors or sites. The stuff that makes up these spheres is sometimes referred to as social interactions, social relations or social practices. Somers sometimes refers to the sites as ‘assemblages of institutions’. I do not think that there is much at stake in these terminological conventions, and I will not worry about this in my remarks. I will refer to them as *spheres of social practices*, but they could just as easily be called domains of institutions or social relations.

- (2) The choice of the word 'market' to identify one of the spheres, rather than—for example—capitalism.
- (3) The way of conceptualizing the power relations linking these spheres required for a vibrant civil society.
- (4) The relationship between democracy and the triadic model of state, market and civil society.

2.1 Spatial metaphors

Spatial metaphors are common in sociology and are always tricky. Somers frequently describes civil society as being 'between' the state and the market. She writes, for example, that '[c]ivil society... must thrive as the social site between the market and the state, albeit fully independent of

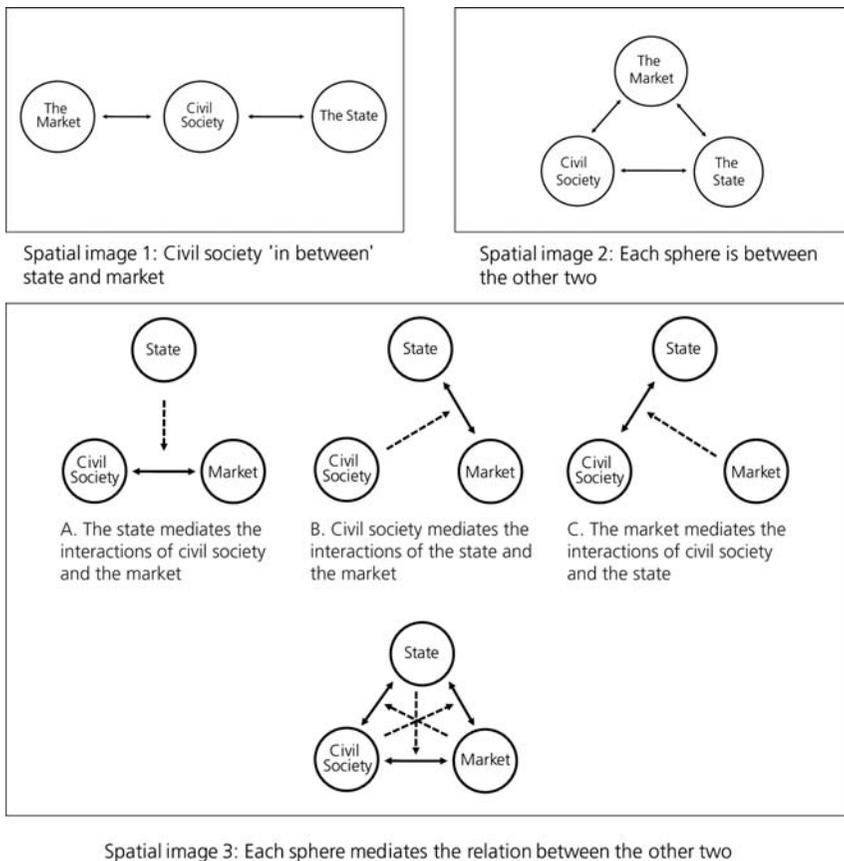


Figure 1 Spatial representations of state, market and civil society interactions.

neither' (p. 31). Perhaps I am being too literal-minded here—this is one of the ways metaphors can be tricky—but it seems that in a full-fledged triadic model, each of the spheres is in a sense between the other two, and, even more significantly, each shapes the interactions of the other two. Three contrasting visual representations of the relationship between state, civil society and the market are presented in Figure 1 above.

I think the third of these spatial representations best captures the array of dynamics in play. The first representation is not fully triadic—it is dyadic with an intermediary domain. In the second representation, the state is as much between civil society and the market as civil society is between the market and the state, but the representation does not really capture the full sense in which these spheres interact. The third representation tries to capture the nature of these interactions. Here is how to read the picture: In diagram A, the state affects the form of interaction of civil society and the market, or to use another expression, the state mediates the relationship between civil society and the market. This is the causal nexus on which Somers' analysis has concentrated. In a regime of market fundamentalism, the substantial withdrawal of the affirmative state means that its role in shaping the relationship between the market and civil society becomes quite weak, and thus the interaction of civil society and the market becomes largely an unmediated, direct relation. There are, however, two other mediating processes in the full triadic model: in diagram B, civil society mediates the relationship between the state and the market. The existence of a strong, vibrant civil society with engaged social movements and robust unions shapes the ways in which the state can regulate market processes and the way market processes might affect the state. And finally in diagram C, the market mediates the interactions of state and civil society. This is one way of understanding the consequences of the centralized statist economies of the Soviet era: markets in capitalist democracies act as a buffer between the state and civil society, weakening the capacity of the state to penetrate civil society; the absence of markets is one of the conditions that lead to the pervasive subordination of civil society to the state.

The simple idea of civil society being 'between' the state and the market does not at all invoke this more complex array of interactions. Of course, it is sometimes useful to have an oversimplified partial representation of a more complex model for particular heuristic purposes. But in this case, the first spatial representation is misleading for the specific cluster of issues explored in Somers' book—how the triumph of market fundamentalism threatens the foundations of citizenship within civil society. If the key idea concerns the failure of the state to buffer the impact of the market on civil society, then it would be better to refer to the state as being 'in between' civil society and the market—

as in diagram A in the third representation—rather than to refer to civil society as being in between the state and the market.

2.2 *The market or capitalism?*

The second issue I would like to raise concerns the identification of the economic component of the triad as ‘the market’ rather than ‘capitalism’. This may be mostly a terminological issue, since when Somers talks about markets she is referring to the historical case of capitalist markets, not markets more generally. Nevertheless, the generic use of the term ‘markets’ does tend to deflect attention from the specifically capitalist character of the social relations and practices within these market systems, and sometimes this leads to the suggestion that the threat to civil society comes from all practices associated with markets as such.

An example of this use of the term ‘market’ occurs in Somers’ discussion of the problem of state regulation of economic processes:

[T]hrough market-driven governance and the conquest of regulative agencies, business is able to undo those existing regulative practices instantiated by the social state and rewrite them to support market principles—i.e. using incentives to reduce carbon dioxide voluntarily rather than regulating it directly. (p. 38)

In this formulation, the use of incentives as a tool of state regulation is identified—and indicted—as a ‘market principle’. The specific example cited is ‘using incentives to reduce carbon dioxide voluntarily rather than regulating it directly’. There are, of course, reasons to be skeptical about carbon trading proposals, and the defence of these proposals is often framed in terms of the way they simulate market principles. Nevertheless, a ‘market’ in carbon emissions is nothing at all like a capitalist market and, if implemented vigorously, could have profoundly non-capitalist effects and be every bit as effective in reducing greenhouse gases as direct regulation. A ‘market’ in emissions only exists because the state creates a threshold of emissions for calibrating which firms have emissions credits and which have deficits. If the threshold is low enough, it would generate great pressure on companies to reduce emissions. An effective carbon trading system requires just as much monitoring of industry by the state as does direct regulation, since without effective monitoring it is impossible to detect cheating. Cheating would lead to fines in both a regime of carbon trading and a regime of direct emission control. One possible advantage in a trading system is that it also creates incentives for successful traders to report cheating. A carbon trading system also has the potential advantage of making possible smoother transitions from one technology to another. All of these properties depend upon the fundamentally statist character of the market in question: it is created by the state, monitored by the state,

tightened or loosened by the state. Of course, everything rides on the question of how tough the thresholds are and how serious the monitoring is. Carbon trading could be completely bogus, with violations ignored and thresholds weak. But the same can happen with direct regulation as well. These are pragmatic issues dependent on political balances of forces. In all likelihood in the American context, because of the power of corporations, carbon trading would be organized in a way to generate weak regulation. But the indictment here should be about the weakness of the standards embodied in the proposals and the absence of adequate monitoring and enforcement of the rules of the carbon 'market', rather than the fact that the mechanism of regulation involves incentives. The use of the generic term 'markets' to describe the economic sphere, rather than 'capitalism' or 'capitalist markets', tends to encourage this kind of slippage.

2.3 Power

The principle way that Somers formulates power relations across these spheres is with the expression 'balance of power'. Here are two illustrative quotes:

My central claim is that ideal-typical democratic and socially inclusive citizenship regimes rests on a delicate balance of power among state, market and citizens in civil society... Disproportionate market power disrupts this carefully constructed balance... (p. 1)

By disrupting what would otherwise be only a dyad of state and market, civil society is thus central to the balance of power in the triadic configuration of state, civil society, and market. (p. 31)

The idea of a balance of power is reinforced with an image of civil society providing a defensive bulwark to block external threats. On the first page of the book where she states in a distilled form the central thesis, Somers writes:

Whether these conflicts result in regimes of relatively democratic socially inclusive citizenship rights or regimes of social exclusion and statelessness largely depends on the ability of civil society, the public sphere, and the social state to exert *countervailing force* against the corrosive effects of market-driven governance. My central claim is that ideal-typical democratic and socially inclusive citizenship regimes rests on a delicate balance of power among state, market and citizens in civil society... Disproportionate market power disrupts this carefully constructed balance. (p. 1, italics added)

And a few pages later:

[S]ocially inclusive democratic citizenship regimes... can thrive only to the extent that egalitarian and solidaristic principles, practices, and

institutions of civil society and the public commons are able to act *with equal force* against the exclusionary threats of market-driven politics. To accomplish this, the expansionary threats of both state and market must *be impeded*. (p. 8, italics added)

Now, it is perfectly sensible to see power as, in part, a question of defending particular institutions from threats. But I do not think this is the best way to understand the forms of variation in the power relations among the state, civil society and the capitalist market necessary for the full achievement of citizenship in the T. H. Marshall sense of political, economic and social citizenship. Instead of seeing the issue as how to achieve a balance of power between civil society, the capitalist market, and the state, I think the central problem is how to subordinate both state power and capitalist market power to power rooted in civil society. Full social citizenship, including the enforceable right to a decent livelihood, full inclusion in the social life of a society and meaningful political equality, requires that both the (capitalist) market and the state are subordinated to civil society, not merely that the three spheres interact with equal force.

In one or two places in the text Somers does seem to move towards this position. For example, on page 42 she writes:

In direct contrast to a market fundamentalist one, a democratic citizenship regime requires a recalibrated balance of power in which the state, market, and civil society all coexist in a pluralist universe, each able to sustain its own discursive logic. The one twist is that the discourses and practices of civil society must be a little ‘more equal’ than those of the market and the state . . . the citizenship ethic must have normative influence over both market contractualism and state bureaucratization and militarization.

‘A little more equal’, however, does not seem to me strong enough: a democratic citizenship regime requires, I believe, the systematic subordination of both the state and the market to civil society.

2.4 Democracy

This brings us to the problem of democracy. The contrast between a vision of a dominant civil society within the triad rather than a triad of equal balancing power is closely connected to the status of the concept of ‘democracy’ in the analysis of citizenship. *Genealogies of Citizenship* contains very little explicit discussion of democracy. Occasionally the word appears as an adjective—as in the expression ‘democratic citizenship regime’ in the quote just cited. And in a few places Somers refers to ‘democratic pressures’ on the state, for example:

Under pluralist socially inclusive citizenship the state has to obstruct the market's potential for undue influence in governance and its illegitimate incursions into civil society. To do so it must exercise power as a countervailing force to the market. To make this kind of power productive, not merely coercive, it must be subject to the democratic pressures of civil society and the public sphere . . . Democratic pressures on the state must be guided by . . . the 'civil power' of solidarity, equality, and rights . . . (p. 43)

In this formulation, democratic 'pressures' are counterposed to the 'market's potential for undue influence in governance'. Pressure on the state is the language usually used for the action of lobbyists and other organized 'special interests'. The underlying assumption seems to be that the state cannot really be a democratic state in the sense of a state which is broadly controlled through democratic processes, so the most we can hope for is an external pressure on its actions. The stronger idea of democracy as rule by the people in which political power is exercised through mechanisms of popular participation and the parameters of state actions are controlled by citizens is not directly explored. Instead, throughout the book the analysis of power and institutions is framed in the language of republicanism, not the language of democracy and popular empowerment.

These are, of course, extremely difficult issues to sort out. Nevertheless, if we are really committed to the comprehensive egalitarian, inclusive ideal of citizenship defended in *Genealogies of Citizenship*, then I think the normative model should have at its core radical democracy. And this, I would argue, implies that both the state and the capitalist market (or the capitalist economy) must be subordinated to power rooted in civil society.

Here is how I formulate this issue in my book *Envisioning Real Utopias* (New York and London, Verso, 2010). I argue that three forms of power are always implicated in the organization of economic practices—that is, in the allocation of economic resources to different purposes and the control over production and distribution. I refer to these as state power, economic power and social power, but in the context of the language of Somers' analysis they could be called state power, market power and civil power. State power is based on the control over rule-making and rule-enforcing over territory. Economic power is based on ownership of economic assets of various sorts. Social power (or civil power) is based on the capacity for collective, cooperative action. Using an agent-centred language of power, you can get people to do things by forcing them, bribing them or persuading them.

Social power is grounded in civil society. It gains coherence through the formation of associations. Among these are unions, social movements and political parties. The word we conventionally use to identify the subordination of state

power to social power (or equivalently, the subordination of the state to civil society) is 'democracy'. Rule by the people does not mean rule by every person taken serially one by one, but rule by the collective organization of people through associations. The word which best identifies the subordination of economic power to social power is 'socialism'. This is what it means, I would argue, to take the 'social' in 'socialism' seriously. But what this really means is extending democracy to the economy. Again, this is equivalent to subordinating the economy (capitalism) to civil society. There are, needless to say, no guarantees in such a process that the actual outcome will be inclusionary and egalitarian. As is routinely pointed out, civil society has a dark side of exclusions based on all sorts of particularistic identities. Nevertheless, I would argue the optimal configuration of power in the institutional triad state, market and civil society for struggling for democratic egalitarian normative principles is one in which state power and market power are democratically subordinated through the exercise of social power.

3. A note on race and class

One of the central empirical themes of *Genealogies of Citizenship* concerns the impact of market fundamentalism on racial inequality in the USA. Somers' basic thesis is that not only has market fundamentalism had the general effect of eroding the foundations of inclusive citizenship, but it has had an especially destructive impact on racial inequalities, intensifying in a variety of ways the 'afflictions of racism'. Here are some illustrative citations:

Yet since the 1970s it [market fundamentalism] has served to radically exacerbate the exclusions of race and class by first delegitimizing affirmative action and then grafting the impersonal cruelties of a 'color blind' market onto these preexisting 'primordially' defined differences. (p. 5)

[W]ith the casualties of market fundamentalism increasing . . . civil society becomes more exclusionary on traditional ascriptive grounds. (p. 41)

[Market fundamentalization and the contractualization of citizenship] have radically worsened the conditions of African-Americans. (p. 73)

Blacks now hold less than one-tenth of the wealth of the white population and are disproportionately represented among the poor and working poor. (p. 100)

Market fundamentalism thus grafted its universalistic discourse onto the substance of a society that was still deeply segregated and rent with

historically inflicted inequalities. In effect, the discursive triumph of market fundamentalism has the effect of freezing in place the identity based inequalities and historical exclusions, and then worsening them through deepening market based inequalities. (pp. 104–105)

In reality, however, two different systems of inequalities and exclusion—one based on immutable particularistic and arbitrary race based attributes, the other based on market-driven class inequalities—have been grafted together to create a previously unmatched level of almost total exclusion from civil society, an exclusion that is much greater than the sum of its parts as it amounts to nothing less than nonrecognition. (pp. 105–106)

But market fundamentalism and the contractualization of citizenship have radically worsened and transformed the afflictions of racism. (p. 114)

I want to examine these statements carefully in terms of their specific empirical content. This may be unfair. Hyperbole is a rhetorical device in certain intellectual contexts, and it is basically unfair to judge such polemics by the same criteria one would use in a less polemical setting. This is what is sometimes called a ‘cheap shot’: taking a rhetorical flourish at face value and criticizing it for empirical inaccuracy. Nevertheless, I think there may be some value in looking at these empirical claims carefully because this could help sharpen our understanding of precisely how market fundamentalism shapes the interactions of race and class.

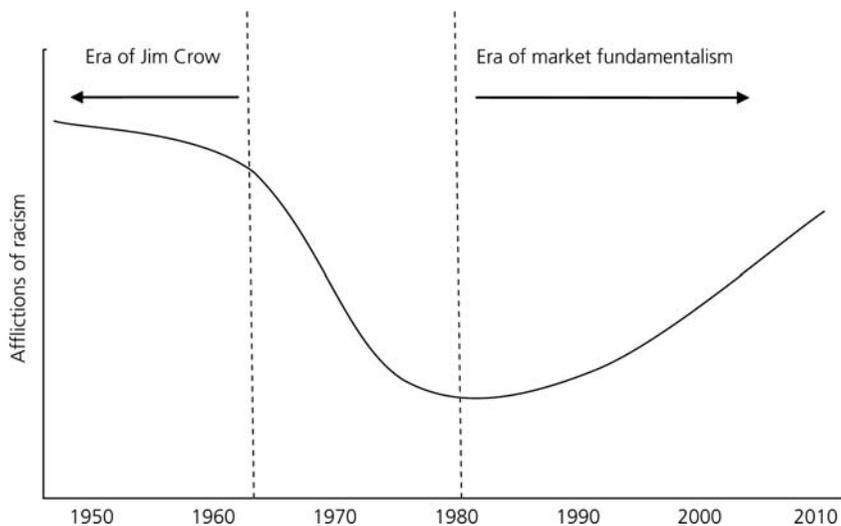


Figure 2 Implied trajectory of ‘afflictions of racism’ 1950–2010.

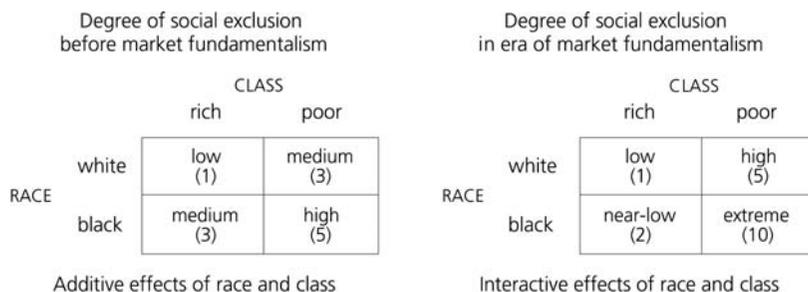
Let us begin with the last quote above: 'But market fundamentalism and the contractualization of citizenship have radically worsened and transformed the afflictions of racism'. Taken literally, this implies a trajectory of 'afflictions of racism' as illustrated below (Figure 2).

The vertical scale in this diagram, obviously, has no natural metric and is meant to be some gestural idea of the cumulative intensity of the different concrete forms that 'afflictions' of racism might take. The point is simply to indicate the hypothesized directions of change in the historical period under study. The claim that the afflictions have dramatically worsened in the era of market fundamentalism means that somewhere around the early 1980s these afflictions began to increase. The statement does not imply that they have become as bad as they were in the era of Jim Crow, so I have drawn the rising curve lower than the curve before the 1960s.

Now, the empirical question is whether there are indicators of real-life conditions of African-Americans which support this trajectory. There is one indicator that definitely rises sharply from around 1980: incarceration rates have risen for both whites and blacks since the 1970s, but more sharply for blacks. This is largely due to the differences in arrest rates and imprisonment for drug offences, which is certainly part of the repressive face of the contractualized notion of citizenship that Somers discusses.

Most other indicators of racial inequality, however, have either indicated slight improvements in the relative position of African-Americans or no change in this period.² Consider occupational distributions. In 1960 11.9% of white men were in managerial occupations compared to 1.7% of black men. By 1980, on the eve of the rise in market fundamentalism, the figure for white men had increased to 12.2% and for black men to 5.0%. That represents reduction in the disproportions from a ratio of 7:1 to a ratio of 2.4:1. Twenty years later, in 2000, the figures were 12.9% and 6.6%, or a ratio of 2.0:1. The parallel ratios for professional and technical occupations declined from 3.2:1 in 1960 to 1.9:1 in 1980 and 1.6: 1 in 2000. To be sure, the sharpest declines in this indicator of 'afflictions of racism' occurred before 1980; nevertheless, the improvement in relative occupational prospects continued during the era of market fundamentalism. Similarly, black/white differentials in education have continued to decline, as have black/white ratios in poverty rates—from about 3.5:1 in 1979 to about 2.3:1 in 2005. Racial gaps in median income and various indicators of wealth have changed hardly at all. None of these indicators is consistent with the claim that the afflictions of racism have dramatically worsened.

²All of the figures which follow come from Wright, E. O. and Rogers, J. (2010) *American Society: How It Really Works*, New York, W. W. Norton.



Note: The numbers in parentheses indicate the magnitude of social exclusion.

Figure 3 Hypothetical interaction effects of race and class.

And yet, there is something obviously correct in Somers' observation that the callous abandonment of poor African-Americans in the aftermath of Katrina signals a harsh new reality and a decline in the idea of full rights of social inclusion in the political community. I think she is probably also correct that what has changed is, in important ways, a consequence of the cultural and ideological shifts bound up with market fundamentalism. But rather than characterizing this change as an intensification of racism as such I think it is better viewed as an intensification of the interaction-effects of race and class. I have illustrated this in a very simplified—maybe even simple-minded—manner (Figure 3).

The tables in Figure 3 indicate the 'degree of social exclusion' for different race and class groups in the period before and during market fundamentalism. Again, the metric in parentheses is completely arbitrary. For simplicity the class categories are rich and poor, but it does not really matter for the purposes at hand how these are designated. In the left-hand table the effects of race and class are additive: each separately increases the degree of social exclusion by two points, and jointly by four points. In the right-hand table the effects are interactive: racial differences among the rich have declined, while class differences in exclusion have increased for both African-Americans and whites, but especially for African-Americans. The result is the extreme social exclusion of poor African-Americans. What has intensified, then, is not the affliction of racism *per se*, but the afflictions of racialized poverty.

This alternative view of the way to think about the intersection of race and class before and during the era of market fundamentalism is more in keeping with the contractualization thesis than the additive model. There is nothing inherently in the logic of market fundamentalism as such which should give any weight at all to ascriptive attributes of persons except insofar as these serve the contractual purposes of statistical discrimination—reducing transaction costs by using a group signal to provide information about a potential contract.

Given the war on drugs, the mass incarceration of blacks—especially young black men—and the economic marginalization of urban blacks, one might anticipate that statistical discrimination on racial grounds would intensify among the poor, but not among the affluent. This would underwrite an intensification of the afflictions of racism for poor blacks, but not for others, in the era of market fundamentalism.

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I have one final empirical comment, or rather empirical question, on the analysis of race and class. In her discussion of racism and the Katrina disaster, Somers acknowledges that a significant part of the observed racism in the reaction of public officials is to be explained by historical and cultural legacies:

[T]he problems that led to Katrina are deeper and of longer duration than can be explained by market fundamentalism and contractualization alone. No proposition makes sense without considering the legacy of chattel slavery, more than six decades of legal exclusion, a hypocritical New Deal that worsened the 'old deal' of race-based exclusion, and the stigmatizing system of welfare Nonetheless . . . much of the fault lies with the noncontractual bonds of citizenship being forcefully displaced over the last four decades by the contractual conditionality of market exchange. (p. 92)

Suppose a skeptic argues that the historic legacies of racism are more than powerful enough a force to fully explain the forms of exclusion observed during the Katrina disaster. How would one provide evidence that market fundamentalism adds anything to the explanation? One strategy would be to systematically compare the Katrina disaster with an earlier catastrophe that occurred before the era of market fundamentalism and see if there were significant differences in the treatment of African-Americans. Of particular importance would be a close comparison of the treatment of poor whites and poor blacks in the earlier conditions.

Somers does refer briefly to one earlier episode (p. 66), with a reference to Ignatieff's discussion of the performance of 'Herbert Hoover and the Army Corps of Engineers . . . in their swift and effective response to the Mississippi Flood of 1927'. The expression 'swift and effective response' indicates one important contrast with the Katrina disaster: the level of competence displayed by the state efforts at relief. But what about the specific dynamics of social exclusion?

I do not know the history here, but relying on Wikipedia we get the following (text taken from Wikipedia³):

³Wikipedia, page on 'The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927', http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Mississippi_Flood_of_1927, accessed July 2010.

In population affected, in territory flooded, in property loss and crop destruction, the flood's figures were 'staggering'... In one noted location, over 13 000 evacuees near Greenville, Mississippi, were gathered from area farms and evacuated to the crest of the unbroken Greenville Levee, and stranded there for days without food or clean water, while boats arrived to evacuate white women and children. The Greenville Levee was 8 feet wide and approximately 5 miles long.

Several reports on the terrible situation in the refugee camps, including one by the Colored Advisory Commission by Robert Russa Moton, were kept out of the media at the request of Herbert Hoover, with the promise of further reforms for blacks after the presidential election. When he failed to keep the promise, Moton and other influential African-Americans helped to shift the allegiance of Black Americans from the Republican party to Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Democrats.

As a result of displacement lasting up to six months, tens of thousands of local African-Americans moved to the big cities of the North, particularly Chicago.

This does not sound so different from the Katrina episode nearly 80 years later. But of course, 1927 could also be described as an earlier era of market fundamentalism, so perhaps the same mechanisms were in play then as now. Alternatively, in both eras, directly because of racism, African-Americans, especially poor African-Americans, lacked the full citizenship of social inclusion.