

Jonathan Tran. *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021, 368 pages. \$35.00. ISBN-10: 0197617913

Jonathan Tran's *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism* is a welcome addition to the slowly growing body of literature on Asian American Christian Ethics (most notably, Kao and Ahn, *Asian American Christian Ethics*, 2015; Choi, *Disciplined by Race*, 2019). Given the US political climate with its racial undercurrents now—especially in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests railing against the murder of George Floyd and other African Americans, and heightened anti-Asian racism made visible through hate crimes with varying degrees amid the COVID-19 pandemic—this book is a timely theological intervention on contemporary race-talk, particularly various discourses of “Asian Americans.”

The goal of this monograph is more ambitious and nuanced than a mere condemnation of anti-Asian racism. One of Tran's theses is that without dismantling the exploitative capitalist structure, we cannot dispel racism. Tran aims to problematize the mainstream or “orthodox” critique of racism (what he calls “identarian antiracism”) by drawing upon an alternative approach offered by the Black radical tradition that includes Cedric Robinson as one of its main voices. In Tran's view, while the former approach seeks to resist racial injustices, it ends up re-inscribing rather than undermining binary race thinking mainly due to its overemphasis on *racial identity*. Meanwhile, the latter provides us with a much more in-depth and extensive analytical framework that critically examines the way racialization has been intertwined with the operation of “racial capitalism,” which pits Asian Americans against other racial minority groups.

While for Tran, Black Marxism provides a profound theoretical corrective, he also takes a cue from the recent ethnographic turn in theological studies. Throughout the six chapters segmented into two parts, Tran draws upon the lived experiences of two different groups of people: Chinese migrants in the Mississippi Delta (in 1868-1969) and Redeemer Community Church at San Francisco (in the present). In part I, the Delta Chinese case offers us “a keyhole into the operations of racial capitalism” (68), helping us understand the way racial categories are constructed as a justification for domination and exploitation. The second story placed at the center of part II, which is more hopeful than the first one, illustrates an alternative to racial capitalism: “deep economy.” With this second case study, Tran, shifting gears, proffers an unapologetically *theological* account of how Asian American Christians can and ought to expose and dismantle the logic of racial capitalist structure by living by a different script.

Despite the heavy dose of Black Marxism, ethnographic research, and critical theories in many pages, Tran takes pains to reclaim the role of “religion” (read: Christianity) in contemporary racial politics. While he aptly gestures toward a turn to political economy, this political economy in turn leads him to what (only) Christianity offers, namely, *divine economy*. Without dealing with this metaphysical or *theological* issue, Tran contends, we won't be able to be released from the grip of racial capitalism. It would be quite hard not to hear the voice of Stanley Hauerwas in the very last sentence: “Here is revolution, at least where it begins. Or, where it continues, with the church being the church” (297).

I am largely in agreement with Tran that race and class should be theorized in tandem—the relationship between the two is necessary rather than accidental—and that identity politics is unfruitful and misleading. Yet I am less sure about whether his Frasierian subordinating of “insults” (recognition) to “injuries” (redistribution) is a right move, since there seem to be some cultural factors irreducible to political economy; acknowledging these residual factors differs from reifying them. More importantly, I found myself questioning Tran's (broadly Hauerwasian) political

theology given the main points of his own argumentation. His political ecology, of course, should be distinguished from the so-called “Benedict option,” a countercultural ecclesiology combined with a thinly veiled white identity politics. One might still be left, though, being suspicious of Tran’s McIntyrean emphasis on the essential role of a thick religious tradition for revolution given the pluralistic democratic condition today. If Tran is rightly concerned about “identarian antiracism,” how can we also avoid *Christian* forms of identarianism? While acknowledging that Spirit can work *both inside and outside* the church (283), Tran discusses little about coalitional politics of interfaith organizing that cuts across the boundary between Asian American Christians and, say, Black abolitionists like Angela Y. Davis who is also formed by the Black radical tradition.

That said, *Asian Americans* is a highly intriguing and sophisticated work with solid research, careful reflections, and bold theological claims. This volume will inspire a lively conversation regarding the race-class relationship as well as the past, present and future role of Asian American Christians for racial in/justice in the US.

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