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USA

Making Race Disappear

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“If anyone doubts that the mainstream media fails to tell the truth about our political system (and its true winners and losers), the spectacle of large majorities of black folks supporting Hillary Clinton in the primary races ought to be proof enough. I can’t believe Hillary would be coasting into the primaries with her current margin of black support if most people knew how much damage the Clintons have done – the millions of families that were destroyed the last time they were in the White House thanks to their boastful embrace of the mass incarceration machine and their total capitulation to the right-wing narrative on race, crime, welfare and taxes. There’s so much more to say on this topic and it’s a shame that more people aren’t saying it. I think it’s time we have that conversation.” – Michelle Alexander, Facebook comment, January 28, 2016. Alexander is the author of *The New Jim Crow, in the Age of Colorblindness*.

Many black intellectuals, academics and activists of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) have echoed Alexander’s amazement at Hillary Clinton’s Black support. “Establishment” African-American “leaders” are mainly backing Clinton and highly critical of the “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders for challenging her in the 2016 presidential campaign. They say his calls for a “political revolution” are unrealistic and a fantasy.

Some BLM activists have joined the #feeltheBern campaign because of his self-proclaimed radicalism on class issues. Sanders has focused his effort on denouncing income inequality, making the one percent pay more in taxes and demanding that big Wall Street banks be broken up.

His program embodies a liberal view that “lifting all boats” (except the one percent) will resolve the root cause of the race issue, since income inequality hits African Americans hardest. Although improving his stand since the campaign began, Sanders clearly does not see the social issues of racism and extra-legal police violence and murder as central to his election campaign.

In a biting commentary “Why Hillary Clinton Doesn’t Deserve the Black Vote,” Michelle Alexander points to a perspective that goes even beyond Bernie Sanders’ position:

“Of course, the idea of building a new political party terrifies most progressives, who understandably fear that it would open the door for a right-wing extremist to get elected. So we play the game of lesser evils. This game has gone on for decades. W.E.B. Du Bois, the eminent scholar and co-founder of the NAACP, shocked many when he refused to play along with this game in the 1956 election, defending his refusal to vote on the grounds that “there is but one evil party with two names, and it will be elected despite all I do or say.” . . . After decades of getting played, the sleeping giant just might wake up, stretch its limbs, and tell both parties: Game over. Move aside. It’s time to reshuffle this deck.” [\[1\]](#)

Race and Class

The burial of race into class is as old as the socialist and radical syndicalist movements in the United States and internationally. Many socialists once claimed that the nationalism of the colonial and oppressed peoples could only be resolved by working class revolutions, and that all nationalisms were reactionary. (Lenin and the Bolsheviks, correctly, explained that the nationalism of the oppressed could have a revolutionary dynamic and that their struggles

must be supported.)

Improving the conditions of workers does not automatically or eventually eliminate racism and racial divisions. “Disappearing” race becomes a way to evade the false consciousness of white workers regarding race and racism. It is easy to confront class issues, but becomes very emotional and personal when dealing with racial tensions.

It is not a surprise to me that Sanders rejected the criticisms made by Ta-Nehisi Coates, national correspondent of The Atlantic magazine, of his refusal to take a positive stand on reparations for Black slavery. Responding to the argument that Clinton doesn’t support reparations either, Coates explained (“Bernie Sanders and the Liberal Imagination,” January 24 issue):

“Hillary Clinton has no interest in being labeled radical, left-wing, or even liberal. Thus announcing that Clinton doesn’t support reparations is akin to announcing that Ted Cruz doesn’t support a woman’s right to choose. The position is certainly wrong. But it is hardly a surprise, and doesn’t run counter to the candidate’s chosen name.”

“There is no need to be theoretical about this,” Coates continues.

“Across Europe, the kind of robust welfare state Sanders supports — higher minimum wage, single-payer health-care, low-cost higher education — has been embraced. Have these policies vanquished racism? Or has race become another rubric for asserting who should benefit from the state’s largesse and who should not? And if class-based policy alone is insufficient to banish racism in Europe, why would it prove to be sufficient in a country founded on white supremacy? And if it is not sufficient, what does it mean that even on the left wing of the Democratic party, the consideration of radical, directly anti-racist solutions have disappeared?”

Black Skin Always Targeted

Race is interwoven in U.S. history and our current reality. It isn’t a sidebar. It impacts everything, and class struggle without an understanding of its connection to race will never lead to a successful political or social revolution in the United States, Europe or elsewhere in the world.

Eugene Robinson, an African-American columnist for The Washington Post, made this same point about race when writing about the white armed occupiers of public property in Oregon: “What do you think the response would be if a bunch of black people, filled with rage and armed to the teeth, took over a federal government installation and defied officials to kick them out? I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t be wait-and-see.

“Probably more like point-and-shoot.” (January 4, 2016)

African Americans are 13% of the population but nearly 60% of all males incarcerated in prisons (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). Legally sanctioned violence by cops against unarmed Blacks is carried out across the country daily. Black unemployment is double the national average, no matter the health of the economy.

Why is this? It is clearly not simply a class question.

The first Black president, who declines to talk about race, knows this. He also advocates a classic liberal position: helping everyone will help poor Blacks too. The reality is different: Blacks making six figures a year tend to live in the

kind of neighborhoods that whites live in who make much less.

Facts show that only some Blacks benefit, which is okay for a majority of whites "so long as those educated, upper income African Americans don't talk about historical racism and the need to do something about it today.

W.E.B. Du Bois in his famous 1903 essay "The Talented Tenth" explained the responsibilities of the educated Black middle class of the time to help lift up the community as a whole. As a leading Black intellectual, civil rights fighter and founding member of the NAACP, Du Bois firmly believed it was the obligation of educated and better off Africans Americans to be involved in struggles for freedom and full equality.

In the 1960s and 1970s, after the victory over Jim Crow in the South, the debate sharpened over the role of the new middle class and Black intellectuals in the fight for full equality. Was it enough to become elected officials in the Democratic Party and get jobs in formerly all-white institutions now that legal rights were won?

Martin Luther King Jr., like Du Bois before him, pushed the educated to fight for the poorest in the community. Legal equality was not economic equality. His assassination in 1968 cut short his Poor Peoples' Campaign that focused on affirmative action for African Americans and economic advancement for all working class people.

The far left of the Black liberation movement (Black Power advocates) pushed for revolution against the status quo and state power. The revolutionary wing was crushed by the government and its police. The assimilationist wing of the civil rights leadership won as the Black Elected Officials, most from the movement, pushed the traditional organizations off center stage. Left out in the cold are the working class and those permanently underemployed, homeless and without representation.

Class Divisions Deeper

Today that same class divide in the Black communities is stronger than ever. The Talented Tenth has increased its wealth. But the class stratifications have grown even larger. The Black working poor are much poorer.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. of Harvard University discussed this division in the February 1 issue of The New York Times, "Black America and the Class Divide:"

"The Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson calls the remarkable gains in black income 'the most significant change' since Dr. King's passing. When adjusted for inflation to 2014 dollars, the percentage of African-Americans making at least \$75,000 more than doubled from 1970 to 2014, to 21 percent. Those making \$100,000 or more nearly quadrupled, to 13 percent (in contrast, white Americans saw a less impressive increase, from 11 to 26 percent). Du Bois's 'talented 10th' has become the 'prosperous 13 percent.'"

But, Dr. Wilson is quick to note, the percentage of Black America with income below \$15,000 declined by only four percentage points, to 22 percent.

"In other words, there are really two nations within Black America. The problem of income inequality, Dr. Wilson concludes, is not between Black America and White America but between black haves and have-nots, something we don't often discuss in public in an era dominated by a narrative of fear and failure and the claim that racism impacts 42 million people in all the same ways."

The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement reflects a new generation of young Black women and men taking up the banner first raised by African Americans of earlier activist generations. They are not fighting simply for themselves but all Black people. It is not about symbols such as the Confederate flags, but real structural racism.

Centrality of Race

The debate between Hillary Clinton's corporate "liberalism" and Bernie Sanders' "radical" democratic socialism misses the underlying racial issues in U.S. society. It is not an accident that the Republican presidential candidates appeal to the white working class who believe that Blacks and immigrants have taken what they believe is theirs. "Take Back Our Country" and "Make America Great Again" is about white supremacy.

In the heyday of industrial unionism in the 1930s and 1940s, in most unions racism was not considered a class issue. Segregated locals in the South, and a hands off policy for the most part towards the civil rights battles, largely prevailed until the 1960s.

The great gains white workers won under the New Deal in the 1930s and later in the 1950s, including buying homes, largely excluded Blacks. Banks would not lend to qualified Blacks, or gave them exploitative loans. Redlining was common in every urban city. Realtors enforced the blacklisting of African Americans.

Race is crucial to understanding politics, laws and economics. It affects all classes – the working class the most. It impacts housing, education and employment. It is a matter of life and death, as every person of color knows when confronting police.

Black lives are discounted in the eyes of whites and official arms of the state. It is not conspiracy theory to say this. It is hard fact.

Black Women Leadership

What's especially powerful in today's new generation of Black activism is the disproportionate number of women leading the fight – on college campuses, in the streets and in all spheres of the movement. They are articulate, educated and don't accept that being relatively privileged and better off than their brothers and sisters in the community makes them more like whites than not. It is a breath of fresh air.

The disappearance and subordination of race in liberal politics is why so many young African Americans are less than excited by either Clinton or Sanders.

The activists joining the Sanders campaign see it as a way to bring race and fight against racism into the class debate, to push forward a political and social revolution. The Sanders campaign, however, cannot substitute for a strong BLM movement effort.

The reality of racial and national oppression is a daily grind. Antiracist change comes through struggle, not elections.

[Against the Current](#)

[1] <http://www.thenation.com/article/hi...>