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Nonracialism Through Race (and Class)

- Debate -

Publication date: Monday 1 September 2014

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This article challenges us to go beyond an either-or approach to race and class. It is a very slightly edited version of an article originally published in 2006 in issue 56 of the print magazine *New Socialist*.

Shortly before the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, amidst wonderfully frantic activity by newly legalized and relaunched organizations of struggle, one of the many keywords being debated was "nonracialism."

Since building a "nonracial" nation was a longstanding African National Congress goal, the word gave shape to discussions about how to address racial inequality amidst other social transformations in a Free South Africa, especially during considerations of affirmative action in the draft constitution.

Both liberals and some Marxists argued against stressing the "racial" in the sophisticated analyses of racial capitalism that held purchase in that time and place. The former could claim that capitalism without apartheid would settle racial inequalities through growth while the latter could emphasize that ending capitalism was the key, and perhaps the prerequisite, to a nonracial future.

In this context, a certain phrasing by militants struck home as particularly brave, precise and worth thinking about as a starting place for any discussion of race and racism: "The way to nonracialism is through race."

As defenders of this approach we wish to challenge readers of *New Socialist* to go beyond considerations of race and class which begin from "and therefore can't transcend" an either-or stance. If the 20th century drove home any point to revolutionaries, it is that oppressions are multiple and cannot be explained entirely through class relations.

Even as we criticize some Marxists for economic reductionist analyses of racism, or for failing to see the critical place of anti-racism in building resistance to capitalism, we see ourselves as part of the struggle to define a political economy of racism from within the Marxist tradition.

Marxist tools and analysis

Marxism has produced the best tools for understanding race and racism: the idea race is constructed by society has been best and most articulately explored by Marxists, and the tradition of the critical study of whiteness has been led by materialists as pluralistic in their approaches as James Baldwin, WEB DuBois, Oliver Cox, Karen Brodtkin, Michael Rogin, Theodore Allen and Noel Ignatiev.

So, too, was the fundamental refusal to accept race as scientifically real and measurable a contribution of Marxism. It is no surprise that the leading debunkers of racist science, most notably the late Stephen Gould, would be influenced by historical materialism. Among other brilliant contributions, Gould's analysis of how race was assumed as it was measured in order to prove its existence gave us one of the most trenchant historical materialist arguments against racial difference as biologically measurable and thus real, long before the human genome arrived with its "new" evidence.

These tools have never been more needed than they are now. Much of the world continues to throw up clear lessons regarding the continuing significance of race to the structuring of oppression, to the shaping of strategies of rule under capitalism, and to some of the contours of resistance.

In Venezuela, opposition to Hugo Chavez and to his social base includes anti-indigenous and anti-African characterizations so broad and so racist that the veteran leftwing journalist Tariq Ali regards the elite there the world's most self-consciously white reactionary force; in Brazil affirmative action has just begun, while in the US it has grown ever more clear that powerful rightwing forces promote a "colourblind conservatism" that seeks to end not only affirmative action but also the very gathering of statistical evidence on racial inequality.

In the 2004 presidential election a Bush vote was equally well predicted by making over \$200,000 a year and by being a white male. Recently, a top French politician suffered criticism for his racist attacks on Islamic youth rebelling against police violence in and around Paris. His response was to quickly plan a trip to Martinique designed to emphasize how little colour matters in the French colonial world. He was so thoroughly unwelcomed by Martinique's great poet and theorist of liberation, Aime Cesaire, and others that the publicity stunt had to be cancelled.

Class without race?

Surprisingly, amidst such realities, we are now witnessing an attempt by sections of the left and of liberalism to distance race from class analysis in a way that leaves no doubt as to the overwhelmingly greater import of the latter and indeed calls into question the very use of race and racism as categories of analysis.

The late activist sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his co-thinker Loic Wacquant, for example, have attempted to portray aspects of the analysis of the racial axis of power in the world, and particularly the rise of affirmative action in Brazil, as the terrible result of the heavily funded export of "cunning" and "imperialist" US ideas. Antonia Darder and Rodolfo Torres hold that the "problem of the twenty-first century" is the use of concepts like "race" and "whiteness," echoing US socialist Eugene V Debs's claim that (assumedly white) socialists properly had "nothing special" to offer African Americans except a place in the class struggle.

In this view, concerns about the racialization of power or structural analyses of whiteness, by default or design, provide a "smokescreen" to "successfully obscure and disguise class interests." While Darder and Torres allow that "racism" is still a problem worth addressing, the writings of the radical political scientist Adolph Reed, Jr., are done even with all that. "Exposing racism," he argues, is for activists "the political equivalent of an appendix: a useless vestige of an earlier evolutionary moment that's usually innocuous but can flare up and become harmful." Echoing Debs, Reed maintains that class is the "real divide."

This kind of one-sided and dismissive approach arises out of a number of things: the fact that class and race are different kinds of categories, the distressing continuing popular associations of race with biology in the face of all decisive scientific evidence to the contrary, the tacit acceptance of ethnic cleansing as a tool of warfare, the decades of defeat for anti-racist movements in some nations, and the difficulties in bringing the worldwide struggles against what participants call "racism" closer together. But this context does not provide an excuse.

In this article we argue that the way to both nonracialism and to anti-capitalism is still through race and class analysis as well as anti-racist action. The editors of *New Socialist* have given us not just the task of explaining our method but of offering some thoughts on the nature of racism today. In doing that we hope to touch on several aspects that we think are particularly vital to an anti-racism that is sophisticated without being jargonistic, and militant while realizing that the slogan "Black and White Unite and Fight" is, as Trinidadian-born revolutionary socialist CLR James once

said, "unimpeachable in principle... ButâEuros! often misleading and sometimes even offensive in the face of the infinitely varied, tumultuous, passionate and often murderous reality of race relations"

There is an overriding Marxian tendency to reduce the cause of racism to competition among workers for jobs. Yet the idea that racism is produced always as a result of labour market competition cruelly disregards the possibility that racist acts are sometimes, or may often be, acts of racial empowerment, rather than of class disempowerment. The existence of all-white schools and neighbourhoods originates now less than ever in patterns of job discrimination, as workplaces and residences are geographically separated sometimes by great distances. And if we acknowledge that some of the most white places in society are untouched by multi-racial labour market competition then we have to grapple with the idea that race and racism grow and develop beyond the specific relations of production or reproduction.

Drawing inspiration from Lenin's understanding that ideology is real and DuBois' idea that race gives white workers a psychological wage, we understand that race "like gender" organizes relations of power in multiple ways. Understanding racism necessitates a separate and distinct perspective on power relations beyond the terms of class. The history of death row in the United States makes it clear that killing a white person is considered a more harshly punishable crime than killing a Black person, highlighting the need to understand the state's role in not just overseeing, but in creating, social rules based on race.

Learning from Australia

A brief account of the recent travails of the Left and labour in Australia shows why it is so urgent to raise the call for continued focus on race as well as class relations of power.

In early December of 2005, the rightwing Liberal Party government rammed through, largely without debate, a harrowing series of laws that put that nation in the front ranks of reaction worldwide. John Howard's government passed a draconian new labour code squarely in the tradition of Thatcherism, and an anti-terrorism act that rivals the US Patriot Act.

The centrepiece of the triumph of neoliberalism, and the focus of the most successful left and labour opposition, lies in the dramatic reverses in labour law. The massive and euphemistically named "WorkChoices" bill abolishes unfair termination appeals in all businesses with less than 100 workers and in all of the sure-to-be-many cases where the employer claims that layoffs reflect "operational requirements." It guts overtime premium pay and enables forced overtime work in a way that will be the envy of Bush administration anti-labour strategists. It severely restricts union access to workplaces while sharply limiting and increasingly criminalizing the right to strike. The bill allows for unilateral termination of expired agreements by management. Minimum wage settlements are put in the hands of a commission mandated to make economic competitiveness - not the living and fair wage ideas so prominent in white Australian industrial history - the benchmark in setting standards. In the run-up to the bill's passage its opponents mobilized hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in what were, with the anti-Iraq War protests of 2003, the biggest in the nation's history.

The anti-terrorism bill, passed without similar mass protest after gag orders to curb reporting on its contents, authorizes detentions without evidence of criminal involvement and without disclosure of incarceration. Even the disclosure of facts regarding these irregular seizures and interrogations of persons is itself made a crime both for journalists and others. The bill grants "shoot to kill" immunities in pursuits of possible detainees. It opens the way "in a manner chilling to aboriginal activists who necessarily build their campaigns for land rights and "stolen wages" on searching and vocal criticism of government policy "to prosecutions on charges of "urging disaffection" with the

state.

The great South African novelist JM Coetzee, now living in Australia, put the new law's inhumanity squarely in human terms. He offered a scenario in which "someone called a reporter and said 'Tell the world-some men came last night, took my husband, my son, my father away, I don't know who they were, they didn't give names, they had guns.'" And he spelled out the results: "the next thing that would happen would be that you and the reporter in question would be brought into custody for furthering the aims of a terrorist [and] endangering the security of the state." Coetzee continued, "All of this [was done] during apartheid in South Africa in the name of the fight against terror... I used to think that the people who created [South African] law that effectively suspended the rule of law were moral barbarians. Now I know that they were just pioneers ahead of their times."

While elements of the Labour Party fought relatively hard on the trade union legislation, its historically racialized perspective on labour allowed it to define its class interests separately from what it believed to be its security interest. Thus Labour voted with the Howard government on the anti-terror bill, even as the United Nations warned of the possibility that the legislation would ratify anti-immigrant racist hysteria and victimize asylum-seekers. In an angry post-mortem when the law passed, the Law Council of Australia held, "Unlike the Labour Party, we've put up a good fight."

Within a week of the legislation's passage, many Australians mobilized in a militant demonstration in the Sydney area, though not of the kind for which we would hope. At the time of these historic legislative defeats for the working class and the Left, what in Australia is called "talkback radio" became saturated with political exchanges and calls to action. The popular populist radio host Alan Jones strongly urged the need for "a rally, a street march, call it what you will. A community show of force." Radical groups joined in building the protest. When thousands gathered at the week's end the policing was so hesitant as to suggest broad sympathy with the demonstrators. Nonetheless the crowd of between five and ten thousand embraced extralegal tactics and violence lasted for many hours. The early December actions absolutely galvanized press attention with giant headlines clearly distilling the crowd's message.

But, as the blaring headlines showed, that message did not include a murmur of protest against the week's legislative barbarisms. Instead it urged "RACE HATE" (Herald Sun) and threatened to begin "RACE WAR" (The Australian). Jones, the talkback radio riot organizer, was a racist populist of the variety so familiar on US airwaves. The radical groups building the mob were white supremacist ones. The victims of the extremely bloody and well photographed militancy were the few Arab youths on beaches that organizers and the mob had declared off limits. Arab swimmers suffered taunts and attacks as potential bombers, as threats to Australian women, and as puritans opposed to bikinis, nudity and beer on the beaches. On Cronulla Beach, the white crowd could see itself as the beleaguered combative essence of the Australian nation. "And the mob," as one newspaper put it, gesturing towards The Pogues' great anti-war anthem, "sang 'Waltzing Matilda.'"

After parliamentary defeats and the beach riots, many on the Left turned to building resistance in single-issue campaigns that focus on the "real" and "unifying" issues of class and capitalism. This strategy, they believed, would draw energies away from the irrationalities that fueled the Cronulla mob and allow them to identify and champion alternative national traditions and values in Australia that could lead to deep opposition to attacks on both workers and on immigrants. Yet to follow this seemingly non-racialized course is to ignore the very real, and distinct, problem of racism. That the full and excellent website of the main Australian trade union federation did not mention the riots underscores this point.

Such a response continues patterns firmly established in the campaigns against repressive labour legislation. In the former campaign, the labour federation argued for the existing laws because "for more than a hundred years, Australia has had an industrial relations system that has given working people a share of the benefits of economic prosperity when times are good and ensured that there are decent protections... when times get tough." The leftwing

journalist John Pilger worries that the new labour code has "put paid to Australia's tenuous self-regard as the 'land of fair go.'" He recites a litany of firsts that gave reason for such a self-image: women's suffrage, the minimum wage, the Labour Party, the eight-hour day, the Australian ballot. "In the 1960s," Pilger concludes, "with the exception of the Aboriginal people... Australians could boast of the most equitable spread of national income in the world. " Such appeals ignore, or in Pilger's case literally bracket, the decimation of aboriginal people, land seizures, stolen wages, stolen children and exclusion from the very social goods for which the nation is extolled. Similarly disappeared is the unambiguous grounding of Australian social democracy and women's suffrage in white supremacy and Asian and Pacific Islander exclusion.

Rightwing victories are not explicable without understanding the dynamics of white supremacy exposed by the beach riots. While the Howard government does not generally more than flirt with openly vulgar racism – the prime minister's response to the riots was that Australia is a colourblind society – its attacks on indigenous land rights, stalling of the reconciliation process without even of a symbolic apology for settler colonialism, and setting up of offshore compounds in which asylum seekers are indefinitely detained as a precondition of entry speak powerfully. As radio talk shows turned the conversation away from class, labour law and civil liberties to beaches and Arabs, the Howard government announced a study of the alleged pathology and waste of small aboriginal settlements, with a view to the withdrawal of government services and support from them. The Labour Party's feeble colourblind response was to suggest that small white settlements also be investigated.

Such sidestepping cannot work. In Australia, rightwing policies have won votes by uniting nationalism and an individualism leavened by male-bonding around the image of the "battler," the hard-working man struggling indomitably in a hostile and changed world. Made up of elements of frontier mythology, imperial sport and "mateship," the battler is distinctly white. The important indigenous Australian scholar of whiteness Aileen Moreton-Robinson has recently written that "representations of mateship, egalitarianism, individualism and citizenship" are presented as if they have no "connection to whiteness," but in fact at every turn they do connect with it, and with rightwing political success.

The literal wrapping of those in the beachfront mob in flags and flag headbands, the avowals of defense of Australian womanhood, the claiming of the high-ground of talkback radio commonsense before the show of force all tie Cronulla to everyday politics of race and gender. Editorial cartoons in the wake of the bloodshed were far more acute than written editorials. The best of them, in *The Australian*, showed in extreme close-up a gaggle of flabbily fierce white men, brandishing weapons and sporting t-shirts that read "Muslims Out!!" "Bash Lebs!" and "Kill Wogs!" The caption read "Howard's Battlers."

Potent in its linking of racial violence to the policies of the Howard regime, the cartoon accomplishes what the Left should. With racist demonstrators themselves rationalizing their attacks on immigrants and non-white Australian citizens as a direct response to Howard's legislative victories, leftists need to think about the timing of such events. That the most militant expression of rage to follow the passage of the WorkChoices legislation as well as the anti-terror bill was a demonstration of white power – notably aimed at recruiting working-class youths, but not led by them – should inspire leftists to creative and innovative thinking about the explanatory power of race in people's lives today.

Three issues for activists

This kind of thinking requires us to accept the complex but plain notion that race has been created historically and changes over time. Of course, this statement is more true at the level of the state than the individual, but we have to acknowledge that race and racism, while structurally organized, are created and reproduced in everyday life. Indeed, this dimension of race, in which it is created while class is "real," is one of the crutches the Left has leaned on in

order to think less hard about how to combat racism.

Toward the end of creating both anti-racist theory and practice we wanted to speak to three issues we think activists must confront in the process of multi-racial movement building.

1. Rights and Privileges

In a world in which rights are constructed as privileges, it is logical to speak of racism in terms of white skin privilege. But precisely because some of what exist as privileges are in fact rights it is imperative that activists understand the difference between what we are fighting for and what we are fighting against.

As anti-racist activist and scholar George Lipsitz has beautifully articulated, "opposing whiteness is not the same as opposing white people— one way of becoming a [white] insider is by participating in the exclusion of others. White people always have the option of becoming antiracist—we do not choose our color, but we do choose our commitments. Yet we do not make these decisions in a vacuum; they occur within a social structure that gives value to whiteness and offers rewards for racism."

If opposing racism means opposing societal exclusion, expanding opportunity and possibility for those historically and still excluded, it is critical that we attempt to understand the difference between rights and privileges.

What is it that white people must give up? For example, white privilege shields white people from much repressive everyday policing. So, after white supremacist Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, should anti-racists have demanded that white men with short hair be randomly stopped, questioned and detained? Of course not! But today, when people believe anti-terrorism measures are about security "and not at all about race" it's worth pointing out this inconsistency: young white men weren't singled out after McVeigh's bombing in the way that young men of colour have been since Sept. 11, 2001. Should we argue for more policing of white youth because immigrant and Black youth are more harshly policed? No, though we should creatively and with conviction develop language to talk about how skin privilege does shape life experiences without urging personal guilt as a solution.

Knowing the difference between rights that should be expanded and privileges which should not be taken for granted is essential in building genuine multi-racial organizations and societies.

2. Understanding Racism

Theoretically informed writing, even when the language is tough-sledding, can help inform our practice. Thus when Lisa Lowe writes in *Immigrant Acts* that capital often profits "not through rendering labour 'abstract' but by... creating, preserving, and reproducing the specifically racialized and gendered character of labour power," she speaks to what happened in Australia's labour law and on its beaches. She shows us that race is no "fixed essence" but a convergence of contradictions. She models how Marxist insights can be both deployed and extended. Developing as it does out of so many different kinds of intersections, so many different kinds of state actions regarding citizenship, and so many different degrees of unfreedom, race must constantly be specifically situated, which means that racism must also be.

One task of activists should be to continue developing new language for understanding the myriad actions and ideas that fall under the heading "racism." As the freedom movement in South Africa gave us the concept of nonracialism, as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements each expanded our understanding of the difference between legal

and extra-legal discrimination (along with the importance of understanding and taking on both), and as women of colour feminists challenged and fundamentally transformed national liberation movements with regard to gender roles, so, too, do today's activists need to understand the systems of oppression we confront and need to shift. If the UN Conference on Racism proved one thing it is that there are multiple racisms, and thus must be multiple strategies for resistance.

3. What Should We Do?

We must support every small effort, including especially demands for reparations that potentially educate white people about the ways in which capitalism, settler colonialism, slavery and racism developed together in the past, and about how serious anti-racist actions can benefit all of us today. We must expand participation, resist complacency, and demand reform while opposing top-down reformism. We must insist that quiet desperation is the best we can expect without direct action for transformation.

Monday, 23 June 2014

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