

Race and class in America: The case of Rachel Dolezal

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For days on end earlier this month, the American media was consumed by the story of Rachel Dolezal, at the time the head of the Spokane, Washington branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

The revelation that Dolezal was a white woman who had passed herself off for black quickly became the lead on the evening news programs, the nearly exclusive topic on the cable channels, and the subject of scores of commentaries by journalists and academics, most of them critical of Dolezal.

In response to the media campaign, Dolezal was forced to resign her position in the NAACP and give up her seat on the Spokane police oversight board. Her contract as an adjunct professor in Africana Studies at Eastern Washington University was not renewed.

The details of Dolezal's history are now well known. She was born to two white parents who also adopted a number of African-American children. She later married and divorced a black man, with whom she had a son. She pursued studies in African-American culture and received her Master of Fine Arts from Howard University in Washington, DC, a historically black college.

Committed to the pursuit of racial equality, she served as the education director of the Human Rights Education Institute, a civil rights organization in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, before taking up a position in the NAACP.

At a certain point, for some combination of personal or professional reasons, she decided to identify herself as African-American. This ended when Dolezal's parents, from whom she was estranged, "outed" her following local media reports that she had been the target of threats because she was a black woman and prominent civil rights leader in the area.

Dolezal's story became a focus for the obsessive preoccupation with race within the American liberal petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, an obsession that is bound up with definite social and political interests.

The Dolezal story triggered numerous angry and nervous articles arguing that a white person cannot assume a "black" persona. Categories such as the "black experience" and "whiteness" are being bandied about to argue that the two races have no common social or human point of reference. They might as well occupy different planets.

New York Times, the standard bearer of what passes for American liberalism, is one of the most persistent purveyors of these conceptions. The *Times*' columnists and contributors portray an American society tragically and irrevocably split by racial antagonisms.

The flavor of much of the commentary can be gleaned from an op-ed piece by *Times* columnist Charles Blow, who called Dolezal's attempt to present herself as black "a spectacular exercise in hubris, narcissism and deflection."

An outraged denunciation of Dolezal by the black feminist author Tamara Winfrey Harris ("Black Like Who? Rachel Dolezal's Harmful Masquerade") appeared in the opinion pages of the *Times* last week. In the piece, Harris denounces Dolezal as a fraud for ignoring the so-called life experience of "black women—*real* ones," who are unable to "slide into whiteness."

She writes: "Some people have pointed to this strange case as an illustration that race is malleable. I submit that Ms. Dolezal is a reminder that it is not. Racial identity cannot be fluid as long as the definition of whiteness is fixed."

To buttress her argument, Harris invokes the "one drop rule," a completely unscientific convention in 19th century America that defined as black any person who had a single African ancestor. This standard was subsequently adopted into law in the early 20th century in several Southern states as a means of enforcing Jim Crow racial segregation, itself part of a broader effort to divide the working class.

It is telling that this proponent of racial and identity politics relies on a racist law imposed to uphold legal segregation in the South to defend her insistence on the unbridgeable gap between white and black people in America. Harris evidently feels threatened by Dolezal's relative success in passing as an African-American woman (and obtaining an academic post in black studies) and is all the more determined to reinforce the racialist interpretation of America.

There are many other examples of such racialist rubbish. Over the weekend, to cite one, the *Times* published a column entitled "What is Whiteness?" by historian Nell Irvin Painter. The article juxtaposes Dolezal with Dylann Roof, the 21-year-old white supremacist who gunned down nine African-Americans last week in a Charleston, South Carolina church.

Painter relates this crime to the “inadequacy of white identity,” adding that whiteness “is on a toggle switch between ‘bland nothingness’ and ‘racist hatred.’”

One wonders, reading such reactionary screeds, whether their authors stop to consider that their arguments mirror and lend credence to those of outright racists and white supremacists. Followed to its end, the outcome of such a political ideology is a return to conditions of racial apartheid.

It is asserted that one must *be* black to understand the “black experience.” This, of course, has a corollary: namely, that one must *be* white to understand the “white experience.” Among the conclusions that flow from this premise is the contention that white teachers, who cannot understand blacks, should not be allowed to teach African-American students, and black teachers should be prevented from teaching whites.

This racist standpoint, if taken to its logical conclusion, suggests that there should be separate white and black television and radio stations, newspapers, schools, universities, etc. It complements the arguments of those who say the races should be separated from one another all down the line.

Starting from a similar premise, i.e., the supposedly incompatible life experiences of the two races, outright segregationists argue that it is unfair to the new generation to allow intermarriage.

It is not difficult to see how the racist world view of supposedly liberal and “left” academics and journalists leads in the direction of the murderous and hate-filled dogmas of the Ku Klux Klan and similar outfits.

The fact that one individual’s racial identity became the all-consuming focus of the American media illustrates the complete disjuncture between the preoccupations of the privileged middle-class intelligentsia, along with journalists, pundits and politicians—which they seek to impose on popular consciousness—and the reality of American society, which is riven by class divisions.

The experience of black women in society—in fact, of all people, regardless of their race—varies widely based upon the essential social category, class. An African-American woman working in an auto factory has much more in common with the white man working on the line with her than she does with a black woman who sits in a corporate boardroom.

The media, the political establishment and academia insist ever more shrilly that race is the all-pervasive issue in American life precisely at a time when economic, i.e., class, divisions have become more intense and stark than ever before. The grotesque levels of social inequality, affecting all races and ethnic groups, have become a topic of general discussion and the source of mounting popular anger.

Within the African-American population itself, social polarization between a broad working-class majority and a small, wealthy elite is even greater than within the population at large. The economic conditions facing the majority of blacks in America are worse today than they were 50 years ago.

The promotion of race as the essential category of American society serves definite political ends. It helps divert attention from the fundamental class divide in society and impede the growth of political consciousness in the working class. That, in the end, is the reason why it is so fiercely promoted by the official institutions of American capitalism.

Racism remains a factor in the lives of blacks and other minorities, but it is subordinate to, and, in the end, a product of class rule.

It is instructive, in considering how far the “liberal” intellectuals of the *Times* have come on the issue of race in America, to contrast their thoughts with those of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., who was not obsessed with the issues of “white privilege” or the “black experience,” but rather with the struggle for racial and social equality.

King, in his speech “Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence,” delivered at Riverside Church in New York City in April 1967, called for a questioning of the economic system that produced racial and social inequality. “One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway,” King demanded. “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

While he remained within the framework of the Democratic Party to the end of his life, King fought for a radical perspective of social equality. Towards the end of his life, he came to focus on the issues of war and social inequality, opposing the US war in Vietnam, rallying support behind striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, and launching the Poor People’s Campaign, which was focused on demanding social programs to eliminate poverty for all people, regardless of race.

Such concerns are entirely foreign to the present-day purveyors of racial and identity politics.



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