

How the New York Times distorted its own poll on race relations

Barry Grey
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Last Friday, the *New York Times* published as its front-page lead article a report on a recent *New York Times*/CBS poll. The article bore the headline “A Broad Division Over Race in US Is Found In Poll: Relations Seen as Bad.”

The article began: “Seven years ago, in the gauzy afterglow of a stirring election night in Chicago, commentators dared ask whether the United States had finally begun to heal its divisions over race and atone for the original sin of slavery by electing its first black president. It has not. Not even close.”

The article went on to paint a picture of entrenched racial divisions that are rapidly widening, highlighting the poll’s findings that nearly 60 percent of Americans, including “heavy majorities” of both whites and blacks, think race relations are generally bad, and nearly 40 percent think they are getting worse.

An accompanying “Times Insider” blog post by the newspaper’s editor of news surveys, John M. Broder, made clear the *Times*’ conception of relations between whites and African-Americans. Broder wrote that the poll, conducted this past July 14-19, was “the latest in a series of surveys the *Times* has undertaken over more than 20 years to gauge how black and white Americans see their society, or, perhaps more accurately, their two societies.”

A careful reading of the actual poll questions and results, however, gives a picture that, while contradictory, is at odds with the gloomy presentation provided by the newspaper. In general terms, it indicates that far from relations between ordinary white people and black people growing more conflicted and hostile, racial animosities dating from earlier periods are continuing to fade. It suggests that, in their stead, basic class issues common to both races are coming to the fore.

To the extent that the poll reflects mounting disillusionment among both blacks and whites with the political and economic situation, expressed to a certain extent in racial terms, it is a harsh judgment of seven years of the Obama administration, whose right-wing policies have worsened the conditions facing tens of millions of working people, and have had a particularly brutal impact on the most impoverished and vulnerable sections of the working class, including the broad mass of black workers. Of this, the *Times* has nothing to say.

The timing of the poll and the political context in which it was conducted undoubtedly had an impact on the high percentages of both blacks and whites who said race relations were poor and getting worse. The *Times* article noted that the poll came one month after the Charleston, South Carolina massacre of black church worshippers by a white supremacist, and after a “yearlong series of shootings and harassment of blacks by white police officers that were captured by smartphone cameras.”

It was also begun one day after Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old African-American woman who was brutalized and arrested by a Texas cop after a traffic stop, was found dead in her cell.

Given the media presentation of the wave of police beatings and killings of workers and youth, disproportionately affecting blacks, entirely as a racial question, it would not be surprising if many of those polled associated police brutality with generalized racial animosity.

The *Times* article did cite certain findings that pointed in the opposite direction of its presentation of the poll results, without offering any explanation of these contradictions. Thus, it reported: “While only 37 percent said they thought race relations were generally good in the United States, more than twice that share,

77 percent, thought they were good in their communities, a number that has changed little over the past 20 years.”

The *Times* wrote that the Charleston shootings “generated a national outpouring of outrage and grief.” It also noted that while blacks and whites had divergent views on the meaning of the Confederate flag, with 57 percent of whites seeing it as a symbol of Southern pride and 68 percent of blacks calling it a symbol of racism, 55 percent overall approved the decision to remove the flag from the grounds of the South Carolina State Capitol. That figure included 52 percent of whites overall and a majority of Southern whites.

Most significantly, the article reported as a finding “that may highlight class divisions more than racial ones,” the fact that identical majorities of whites and blacks, 59 percent, said that in the US economy just “a few people at the top...have a chance to get ahead.” This highly significant result speaks to the growth of anger over social inequality and disillusionment with the capitalist system that unites all sections of the working class.

Other responses to poll questions pointing to social discontent that transcends race and reflects more basic class divisions were entirely omitted from the *Times* account. In response to the first question—whether the country was on the right or wrong track—a full 66 percent said it was on the wrong track. The percentage of whites expressing discontent in response to this question, 71 percent, was even higher than the share of African-Americans, 54 percent.

In response to the question of whether race relations were “the single most important issue” for the future of the US, 82 percent overall said “no”—that while it was important, so were other issues. That figure included 74 percent of blacks. There was no follow-up as to what these “other issues” were, but clearly they would include jobs, wages, living standards, schools, medical care, housing, pensions and other social questions affecting the entire working class.

Other responses pointed to vast changes in popular consciousness since the days of Jim Crow segregation a half century ago. Asked whether there had been “a lot of real progress getting rid of racial discrimination” or there had been no “real progress,” 71 percent overall said there had been real progress, including 75 percent of whites and 56 percent of blacks.

Asked whether “you personally” would vote for a presidential candidate who is black, 82 percent said they would, including 85 percent of whites and 77 percent of blacks. Interestingly, after seven years of the Obama administration, the percentage of blacks saying they would vote for a black presidential candidate has actually fallen by 11 percentage points.

There is, of course, an unstated political agenda behind the *Times*’ distortion of its own poll results. The leading mouthpiece of American imperialism is among the most relentless purveyors of the politics of race, gender, sexual orientation and identity and life-style questions of all sorts. These politics serve to conceal the fundamental class divisions that dominate capitalist society and divert, disorient and divide the working class. They have served for decades to help channel social opposition behind the Democratic Party, and continue to do so today.

In a country where class issues are becoming ever more stark, the *Times* and the various organizations and publications that orbit around the Democratic Party insist on portraying America as a society hopelessly and irreparably divided along racial lines. Where the facts contradict this portrayal—such as a July 2013 Gallup poll that showed 87 percent of Americans approving black-white marriage as opposed to 4 percent in 1958—these forces simply ignore or distort the facts.

The *Times* poll in its own way reflects the growth of popular anger, discontent and contempt for the Obama administration. To the extent that these sentiments continue to be influenced by racial politics, they point to the critical need for revolutionary leadership to spearhead the unification of the working class and development of socialist consciousness. But there is no doubt that the objective conditions are being rapidly created for a broad social movement of the working class that will facilitate this task.



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