Race and class in American history: A reply to a false explanation of the Trump phenomenon

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Earlier this week, the *New York Times* published an op-ed by ThinkProgress economic policy editor and *Nation* magazine blogger Bryce Covert, titled in its online version "Make America Great Again for the People It Was Great for Already."

The article, passed off as a serious piece about the current state of American politics, exposes the Brown University graduate and the privileged middle class type she exemplifies, indoctrinated on the thin gruel of post-modernism and feminist thought, as completely ignorant of the history of the class struggle in the United States.

According to Covert, white men are supporting Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's promise to "Make American Great Again" because they desire to return to a period of American history half a century ago when they received benefits at the expense of African Americans and women.

"For Mr. Trump it's about whom the government helps, not whether the government helps at all," Covert writes. "He is promising to make the country great again, for the people who had it pretty great in the first place."

"If you ask his supporters, they say life has gotten worse for people like them over the last 50 years," Covert adds. "It seems safe to assume that, in the eyes of Mr. Trump's overwhelmingly white male fans, America was greater a half-century ago. Indeed, it was pretty great — for them."

As proof of this claim, Covert provides a false reading history of the 20th century in which rights and privileges were won or lost in a bitter competition between the races and genders.

Starting with the New Deal in the 1930s and extending into the immediate post-World War II period, she argues, the federal government established social safety net programs in order to benefit white men while purposely excluding most women and minorities.

Social Security and unemployment insurance, the guarantee of the right to unionize, labor protections such as maximum work hours and a minimum wage, and the GI Bill which provided assistance to those who served in World War II—all were implemented to help white men while keeping everyone else down and out.

The significant gains workers made in the first half of the last century are boiled down to being nothing more than the result of a gentleman's agreement between racist and sexist white men, which has since been broken down. Anyone who does not believe that things are better than they were 50 years ago is a racist and a bigot. White men were given everything by the government in an earlier period. Having had all of the advantages for far too long, they should accept a decline in their living standards without complaint!

Excluded entirely from Covert's facile (and, one might add, astonishingly ignorant) reading of history is the brutal reality of the class struggle in the United States. A ferocious industrial civil war raged throughout the country from the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, which was suppressed by the deployment of federal troops, through the mass struggles of the 1930s and 1940s when workers finally won significant concessions from the bosses. During this period, countless workers were beaten, murdered, blacklisted, framed-up, railroaded into prison and shot down in the streets.

The socialist Eugene V. Debs, Sacco and Vanzetti, Joe Hill, Big Bill Haywood and the Wobblies—all of these figures and organizations mean nothing in the racialist view of American history. There is no place for the Haymarket Massacre of 1886, the Homestead Strike of 1892, the nationwide Pullman Strike of 1894, the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, the Great Steel Strike of 1919, the Battle of Blair Mountain of 1921, the 1936-1937 Flint sit-down strike, or the greatest strike wave in American history that lasted from 1945 to 1946.

The working class continued its struggles against dreadful working conditions and exploitation through World War II into the 1950s and through the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. Bloody battles were waged by workers in defense of the rights and benefits they had won well into the 1980s.

It was only though these struggles that workers were able to wrench certain concessions. The ruling class responded with reforms not out of racial or gender solidarity but out of fear of revolution. This fear was particularly great in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917, when the working class took power under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, an event that reverberated through the last century and up to this very day. Workers of every race, ethnicity and gender have looked to that revolution as the most powerful example of what can be accomplished when they consciously fight together as a class against the capitalist system.

Racism is not embedded in the psyche of American workers, as Covert would have us believe. Rather, racial divisions have been used by the ruling class to divide workers against each other, and every effort to unify the working class against this has been met with violence. Jim Crow segregation laws were implemented to block the unification of poor blacks and whites in a burgeoning populist movement at the end of the 19th century. This division was enforced by a decades-long wave of lynchings and racist mob violence that stretched well into the 20th century.

The enormous struggles waged by workers had a definite impact on the class consciousness of Southern black sharecroppers who were brought north as strikebreakers by industrial employers such as Henry Ford, seeking to weaken the labor movement by stoking racial divisions. However, soon even they too were drawn into the class struggle alongside their brothers and sisters who happened to be white.

The most effective struggles of the last century were led by socialists in opposition to all attempts by employers to promote artificial divisions

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within the working class. The industrial trade unions were formed on the basis of a fight to unify the working class, and it was out of this struggle that significant gains were won for all workers.

James P. Cannon, leader of the Socialist Workers Party and one of the founders of the American Trotskyist movement, noted quite powerfully in 1946 that every section of the working class had been radicalized through the vicious class struggle against capitalist exploitation:

> American capitalism took millions of barefooted country boys from the bankrupted farms of the country; put shoes on them and marched them into the regimented ranks of socially-operated modern industry; wet them in the rain of the man-killing speed-up exploitation of the Twenties; dried them in the sun of the frightful crisis of the Thirties; overworked them on the assembly line, starved them on the breadline, mistreated and abused them; and finally succeeded in pounding them into a coherent body which emerged as a section of the most powerful and militant trade union movement the world has ever known.
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> American capitalism took hundreds of thousands of Negroes from the South, and exploiting their ignorance, and their poverty, and their fears, and their individual helplessness, herded them into the steel mills as strikebreakers in the steel strike of 1919. And in the brief space of one generation, by its mistreatment, abuse and exploitation of these innocent and ignorant Negro strikebreakers, this same capitalism succeeded in transforming them and their sons into one of the most militant and reliable detachments of the great victorious steel strike of 1946.
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> This same capitalism took tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of prejudiced hillbillies from the South, many of them members and sympathizers of the Ku Klux Klan; and thinking to use them, with their ignorance and their prejudices, as a barrier against unionism, sucked them into the auto and rubber factories of Detroit, Akron and other industrial centers. There it sweated them, humiliated them and drove and exploited them until it finally changed them and made new men out of them. In that harsh school the imported southerners learned to exchange the insignia of the KKK for the union button of the CIO, and to turn the Klansman's fiery cross into a bonfire to warm pickets at the factory gate.

There were racist white workers during this period, but the struggle led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the dismantling of Jim Crow segregation would not have been possible without the radicalization of black *and* white workers in the first half of the century. White workers and youth played a significant role in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which was not seen as a competition over limited resources between racial groups, but as a fight for genuine equality.

Though Covert may not see it from her outpost in New York City, the truth is that American workers, whether they happen to be white men or not, have a lot to complain about in 2016.

And while she directs her venom against Trump supporters, the logic of her argument extends to all of those who claim that conditions of life today are getting worse. This sentiment has found its most significant expression in the support of millions of workers and students for Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, who has presented himself as a socialist fighting against the "billionaire class."

For the billionaire Republican Trump, making the US "great again" means restoring American capitalism to its position of absolute world supremacy through the erection of stronger border controls, the imposition of heavy tariffs and the massive buildup of the military.

But to the extent there is a response among workers to Trump, and in a different form to Sanders, it is from an understanding that there was a period, now long gone, in which they could find a secure job that would provide them with decent health care, the ability to raise a family and a pension which would provide for a secure retirement.

To understand the roots of workers' anger, one only has to point to the devastating impact of decades of deindustrialization, which has wiped out millions of decent paying blue-collar jobs. Or the raging social catastrophe impacting cities and towns across the country that is the outcome of decades of austerity and social counterrevolution. This has been the direct result of the suppression of the class struggle by the nationalist trade unions.

As a result, working class whites are now experiencing declining life expectancy due to record numbers of drug overdoses, alcohol poisoning and rising suicide rates. And even as a relatively small section of minorities and women have been elevated to positions of power and wealth, social and economic conditions for workers regardless of race or gender have declined significantly over the last five decades.

Today the relentless promotion of racial and gender politics has become the foundation of the Democratic Party. It is bound up with defending and advancing the interest of a privileged upper middle class layer which has benefited from Affirmative Action programs over the last several decades. They seek to convince workers who happen to be black that their interests can be advanced by supporting layers of the ruling class who happen to be black. We see the outcome of these politics in the elevation of Obama, who has presided over the greatest transfer of wealth—to the rich—in US history. Working class women are supposed to back Hillary Clinton, the candidate of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus, because she is a woman. As for working class white men… well, they deserve whatever outrages come their way.

It is the right-wing evolution of the Democratic Party and the upper middle class social layer that forms its political base that allows a figure like billionaire Donald Trump to present himself as an "anti-establishment" candidate who will defend the interests of ordinary people.

Covert's reading of this racialist perspective into American history serves the ultimate function of not only obscuring their history but also of pitting workers against each other. The notion that workers have separate interests based on their race or gender is a political fiction that can withstand neither an examination of the reality of life in the United States nor the great history of class struggle of American workers. The advancement of the interests of the working class continues to be bound up with the fight to overcome the divisions promoted by the ruling class, whether this is from the right-wing or the so-called left.

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