Charles Blow of the New York Times

The right-wing, racialist attacks on the film *Free State of Jones*

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The new film written and directed by Gary Ross, *Free State of Jones*, about a white farmer in Mississippi, Newton Knight, who led an insurrection against the Confederacy from 1863 to 1865, has come under sharp attack by right-wing elements in the American media. By right-wing elements, we mean the "new right" of identity politics advocates.

Underneath the layers of condescension and cynicism one detects in the various attacks on *Free State of Jones* an abysmal ignorance of American history combined with deep hostility to the working class, and to white workers in particular.

A sprawling industry of race- or gender-obsessed academics, journalists and pundits has come into being in the US over the past several decades. These upper-middle-class elements are engaged in a ferocious struggle for privileges and position. Selfish and blind, they regard race or gender as the essential foundation of society and view all phenomena through that false prism. These petty bourgeois elements make up an increasingly important wing of the establishment; they are one of the pillars of the Democratic Party.

It is only natural that such forces would respond with ill-concealed hostility to a work such as *Free State of Jones*, which cuts across the racial paradigm and presents an important episode in American history in terms of class conflict. When the various critics decry the film's "colorblindness" or its "astounding oblivion about race," this is what they mean: it does not conform to the picture they want to build up, of race as the driving force in social life and of the American population as hopelessly dominated by bigotry and prejudice.

"White Savior, Rape and Romance?," by Charles Blow in the *New York Times* is one of the most venomous and symptomatic of the hostile commentaries on the new film.

After blandly noting that the story of *Free State of Jones* is "quite interesting" and briefly describing the film's plot, Blow observes snidely, "It is easy to see why this story would appeal to Hollywood executives."

That's fine, except the film did not appeal to Hollywood executives, and Ross, despite having directed the enormously successful *The Hunger Games*, had "a huge difficulty getting it made," as he told an interviewer. Ross continued, "I had trouble getting it made because it's a drama, and we're in a different kind of a popcorn universe now."

Blow goes on to observe that *Free State of Jones*, as opposed to Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*, "emphasizes white heroism and centers on the ally instead of the enslaved.

"It tries desperately to cast the Civil War, and specifically dissent within the Confederacy, as more a populism-versus-elitism class struggle in which poor white men were forced to fight a rich white man's war and protect the cotton trade, rather than equally a conflict about the moral abhorrence of black slavery.

"Throughout, there is the white liberal insistence that race is merely a subordinate construction of class."

First, there is the matter of historical reality. One has to ask Blow: Is the storyline of *Free State of Jones* fabricated or did these events take place? Newton Knight and his group, which included escaped slaves, drove the Confederate forces out of a considerable portion of southeastern Mississippi. They had the resources, the supplies, the support and the know-how to do it.

It is not a slight against the enslaved blacks in the South as a whole—savagely oppressed and also widely dispersed, like any rural agricultural population—to point out that it took the Union army, which counted in its ranks free black men and former slaves, to smash the slavocracy and its military forces. These are historical facts, Blow cannot simply have it anyway he likes.

Some 400,000 Northern soldiers, the best elements of them ideologically and politically prepared and motivated, died in the struggle to end chattel slavery. It could not have been destroyed without their sacrifices.

Blow's reference to the "desperate" attempt to paint the Civil War as "a populism-versus-elitism class struggle" rather than "a conflict about the moral abhorrence of black slavery" is false and misses the point entirely.

At its heart, the American Civil War was a class conflict, the completion of the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the establishment of the conditions for modern, industrial capitalist society. The most socially and politically conscious elements in the Union army and the North, along with such foreign observers as Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, recognized that the anti-slavery cause represented the line of social progress and would ultimately bring into being or vastly strengthen the force that would do away with bourgeois society and exploitation altogether, the working class. Knight's elemental, plebeian principle that "No man shall stay poor so that another man can get rich" objectively points in the direction of egalitarianism and socialism.

Blow slightingly refers to Knight as the mere "ally," as though such an impoverished farmer had no stake in the struggle against the Confederacy. The fundamental cause of the Civil War was the existence of slavery, but that hardly meant the only interested party was the slave population. The yeoman farmer, the small shopkeeper and merchant, the nascent working class toiling in mills and factories, the urban petty bourgeois and, for that matter, the industrialist, all the socially progressive elements in American society, were agreed—with varying degrees of commitment—on the burning need to do away with the slave system. That "national unity" rapidly disappeared, of course, and a new, great conflict arose: between the workers and the rural oppressed, on the one hand, and the big capitalists, on the other.

The "morally abhorrent" character of slavery was bound up with its historically regressive character, not simply its brutality. Slavery in the

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ancient world was not appalling to the most sensitive and profound of the Greek thinkers, such as Aristotle and Plato, who took it "for granted" and could not "imagine a society without it," in the words of one historian.

As Engels profoundly explained, the final causes of all social changes and revolutions are not to be found "in men's brains," but "in the economics of each particular epoch." The growing perception that existing institutions are "unreasonable and unjust" emerges from the fact that the social order "is no longer in keeping" with changes in the mode of production and exchange. In the case of slavery in the US, the growth of industrial capitalism signed its death warrant. This is not to denigrate those who were horrified by the slave system, but, in the end, their honorable ethical response was a reflection of the fact that a new economic and social order had come into being and could not co-exist with the system in place in the South.

In terms of brutality, the child laborers in Manchester, England, where the average life expectancy for a working class man was 17 in 1840, who "were harassed to the brink of death by excess of labour ... [who] were flogged, fettered and tortured in the most exquisite refinement of cruelty; ... [who] were in many cases starved to the bone while flogged to their work and ... even in some instances ... were driven to commit suicide" (according to a contemporary commentator cited by Marx), were treated with no more kindness than the slaves.

Blow's reference to the supposed "insistence" by "white liberals … that race is merely a subordinate construction of class" is nonsensical. In any case, he means Marxism. American liberalism is a corpse. At their healthiest and most positive, liberals in the US viewed racism as a socio-economic problem, bound up with the aftermath of the Civil War and the ideological efforts by the ruling class to convince the white poor that at least they belonged to the "aristocracy" of the white race.

Blow, characteristic of our period and the intellectual degeneracy of the American ruling elite, has embraced a racialist interpretation of history. The *Times* columnist is not a fascist, but he thinks very much like one. Certainly, an extreme nationalist would recognize and sympathize with his conceptions. His view of American history corresponds to Trotsky's description of the Hitlerite outlook: "History is viewed as the emanation of the race. The qualities of the race are construed without relation to changing social conditions. Rejecting 'economic thought' as base, National Socialism [Nazism] descends a stage lower: from economic materialism it appeals to zoologic materialism."

Blow was born in 1970. During the entire period of his intellectual development he has seen no significant struggle of the working class and has had no acquaintance either with the great social conflicts of which the civil rights movement itself was an expression. He knows nothing of the impact of the CIO industrial union movement in transforming the black working class and urban population.

Blow appears to be unaware of the critical role played by the Russian Revolution and the Communist Party—without entering here into the consequences of its Stalinist degeneration—in the development of the most important black intellectuals and artists in the US. He seems to know nothing about the attraction of the Soviet Union for figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. And why did James Baldwin join the Young People's Socialist League, at that time considered a "Trotskyist" organization? Why did Malcolm X reject racially based politics toward the end of this life and engage in discussions with the Socialist Workers Party? Why did George Jackson begin reading Marx and Trotsky in prison? It is impossible, generally speaking, to understand the political development of African Americans without a consideration of left-wing politics.

Many black youth moving to the left in the 1960s read E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957) eagerly and with great interest. In the book, Frazier, a sociologist, offered a critical analysis of the aspiring black middle class. As the University of Missouri Press comments, "The book met with mixed reviews and harsh criticism from the black middle and professional class. Yet Frazier stood solidly by his argument that the black middle class was marked by conspicuous consumption, wish fulfillment, and a world of make-believe." Oh, what a field day he would have in our time!

It is not Blow's fault, of course, when he was born, two years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., but he belongs to a generation for whom advancement has been associated with quotas, affirmative action and other perks coaxed out of or extorted from the ruling elite. It is not accidental that this several-decade period has produced no major intellectual or artistic figure, no Du Bois, no Wright, no Baldwin.

Blow (like Vann Newkirk II in his equally repugnant comment, "The Faux-Enlightened *Free State of Jones*," in the *Atlantic*) is offended by *Free State of Jones* because it argues that great historical events cannot be explained in racial or ethnic terms. On the basis of the *Times* columnist's outlook, one simply cannot understand why hundreds of thousands of white people died to end slavery.

And what of the great abolitionists, more mere "white saviors" in Blow's eyes? The continuity between the anti-slavery fight and the modern labor movement is embodied in such figures as Wendell Phillips, who presided over the Labor-Reform Convention in 1871, which declared "war with the wages system, which demoralizes alike the hirer and the hired, cheats both, and enslaves the working-man; war with the present system of finance, which robs labor, and gorges capital, makes the rich richer, and the poor poorer, and turns a republic into an aristocracy of capital." Phillips envisioned a society "with no rich men and no poor men in it, all mingling in the same society … all opportunities equal, nobody so proud as to stand aloof, nobody so humble as to be shut out."

The American Revolution and the Civil War, which completed what had been begun "four score and seven years" earlier, were titanic *world* events. The very survival of the North American republic and the international project of democracy depended on the outcome of the latter conflict.

In his letter to Abraham Lincoln, Karl Marx, on behalf of the International Working Men's Association, explained that the war of American independence, "the idea of one great Democratic Republic," had given "the first impulse … to the European revolution of the eighteenth century." Just as the American Revolution, Marx noted, "initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes." The Paris Commune, the first sustained effort by the workers to take power and hold it, erupted only half a dozen years later.

One final point:

Blow asserts that the "the most disturbing feature of the film is the near erasure of slavery altogether and the downplaying of slave rape in particular to further a Shakespearean love story." There is something quite disoriented here. First of all, the film does not erase slavery at all. It is the great social question that hovers over everything, but it does not make every other drama of the Civil War era disappear. The transformation of Knight into an anti-slavery fighter is not insignificant, and it hints at the revolutionary potential of wide layers of the American people. Blow is either hostile or indifferent to this.

Blow wants more violence and brutality, presumably *à la* Quentin Tarantino's vile *Django Unchained* (which the *Times* columnist "found a profound love story with an orgy of excesses and muddled moralities"). How would that change matters, except to appeal to the worst instincts of the film's audience?

When he sneers at the "Shakespearean love story" in *Free State of Jones*, presumably referring to the love between Newton Knight and Rachel, the former slave, one only feels his essential hostility toward the very possibility of interracial relationships.

Blow criticizes Victoria E. Bynum in *The Free State of Jones:*

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Mississippi's Longest Civil War (2001) for referring to “encounters” between Newton Knight and the slave Rachel, to “interracial liaisons” and to Rachel having “been ‘initiated’ into the world of interracial relations.” Blow exclaims demagogically: “Encounters? Liaisons? Initiated? Sexual relations? As long as she was a slave this was rape! Always. Period.”

Bynum wrote a strong reply to Blow on June 27. She noted, “In fact, there were many such ‘relationships’—yes, relationships—that were consensual in the antebellum South, and those relationships were forbidden by law (most, but not all, were between whites and ‘free people of color.’) … By mischaracterizing my remark in that paragraph, Mr. Blow charges me with ignoring the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. Anyone who knows my work knows that nothing could be further from the truth. In *The Free State of Jones*, however, I analyze the relationship of Newton Knight and Rachel Knight on its own terms, and not within the trope of slave rape. The relationship between the two began in the midst of the Civil War. Newt Knight was not Rachel’s slavemaster; they were fighting together against the Confederacy. They lived together until her death in 1889. Not every sexual relationship between a Southern white man and a woman of color was an act of rape, albeit many if not most were exploitative. To level such a blanket charge trivializes rape and ignores the complex stories of interracial relations during the eras of slavery and segregation that historians like myself have struggled for years to bring to light.”

Blow’s hostility toward interracial relationships underlines the extent to which this modern upper middle class identity politics crowd has absorbed the racialist and exclusivist views of the old segregationists.

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