

The New York Times, Michael Eric Dyson and the politics of race

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14 July 2016

Michael Eric Dyson, a sociology professor at Georgetown University and well known author and media commentator, published a column last week (actually, two different versions of a column) in the *New York Times* on the police killings of unarmed African-Americans in Louisiana and Minnesota in which he advanced a stridently racist conception of American society.

Even as protests against the police killings were spreading across the country, attended by thousands of people of all races, Dyson called the police shootings “an undeclared war on blackness,” denounced “white silence,” and attributed the murderous actions of the police to the collective, ingrained racism of “white America.”

It is no accident that this racist diatribe appeared on the web site (a revised version was published in the Sunday print edition) of the *New York Times*. The *Times* has frequently featured commentaries on race by Dyson, as well as similar articles by other promoters of a racist narrative, of which there are many.

The *Times* is the former journalistic flagship of American liberalism. For many years it has been the public voice of the Democratic Party. Its principal constituency is a combination of significant sections of the Wall Street financial elite and a broad layer of the affluent middle class.

In recent years, the newspaper has been relentlessly promoting various forms of identity politics, focused particularly on matters of gender and sexual orientation, and, more recently and with increasing ferocity, on race. Hardly a day goes by when the *Times* does not publish either an editorial, an op ed column or news article portraying America as a racially polarized society with a white population seething with hatred for blacks.

This obsessive preoccupation with race and insistence on the pervasiveness of white prejudice has nothing to do with a struggle for civil rights or anything traditionally identified with a democratic or egalitarian agenda. Rather, it reflects the interests and concerns, in the first instance, of a privileged and narrow elite among African-Americans that is consumed by a striving for greater wealth and privilege.

More broadly, it reflects the concerns of wealthy social layers over the growth of class consciousness and signs of a political radicalization in the working class. The politics of race, whether in the form of anti-black racism or black nationalism and separatism, have long been used as an ideological weapon of the capitalist class to divide the working class and impede the struggle for socialism.

The *Times* is particularly on guard and ready to denounce anything—a political development, a book, even a movie—that challenges its racist agenda. This agenda has become more and more central to the *New York Times* as the class struggle in the United States has grown more intense.

The past several years, in particular, have seen a growth of strikes and protests by oil workers, communications workers, teachers and other sections of workers as the impact of the Great Recession triggered by the 2008 financial crash has continued and deepened, and the policies of the Obama administration have driven down the living standards of working people while further enriching the capitalists and creating record levels of

social inequality.

Deemed particularly alarming are the signs of rebellion by workers against the trade union bureaucracy, seen in the near-defeat by auto workers of last year’s sellout contracts. On top of this, the broad support among workers, and particularly youth, for the campaign of Bernie Sanders on the basis of his claims to be a socialist and opponent of the “billionaire class” revealed the emergence of economic inequality and issues of class, not gender or race, as the central concerns of broad masses of people in America.

These developments have made the *Times* all the more anxious to shift the narrative back to race and gender and use identity politics as a bludgeon against the growth of class consciousness. There is a very direct relationship between this agenda and the politics of the Democratic Party, particularly in this election season. Hillary Clinton, a long-time crony of Wall Street with the closest ties to the CIA and Pentagon, is being marketed in large part as the first female major party presidential candidate.

Dyson’s column is only one of a number of recent examples of this ideological campaign. Two weeks ago, the *Times* published an op-ed piece by columnist Charles Blow denouncing the new film *Free State of Jones*, a stirring account of a rebellion against the Confederacy and the slave system in southeastern Mississippi that brought together white farmers and escaped slaves during the Civil War. Blow specifically attacked the film, which is based on historical facts, for highlighting the underlying class issues in the struggle against the slave-holding aristocracy.

He wrote: “It tries desperately to cast the Civil War, and specifically dissent within the Confederacy, as more a populist-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.”

Blow, it should be noted, followed up his reactionary attack on the film with a *Times* column a few days later praising Hillary Clinton.

Last week’s July 4th commemoration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence became the occasion for the *Times* to publish another in what has become a flourishing genre of commentaries trashing the American Revolution as a reactionary plot by white male slaveholders. Author Robert F. Parkinson wrote: “For more than two centuries, we have been reading the Declaration of Independence wrong.... For [Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams] separation from Britain was as much, if not more, about racial fear and exclusion as it was about inalienable rights.”

The piece by Dyson, about which we will have more to say, has been followed by a long “news analysis” published Wednesday that purports to show that Donald Trump is an expression of the pervasive racism of white people, especially workers, in America. Author Nicholas Confessore writes: “In countless collisions of color and creed, Donald J. Trump’s

name evokes an easily understood message of racial hostility... In a country where the wealthiest and most influential citizens are still mostly white, Mr. Trump is voicing the bewilderment and anger of whites who do not feel at all powerful or privileged.”

Michael Eric Dyson is one of many representatives of an affluent and self-absorbed upper layer among African-Americans that has been systematically cultivated by the ruling class since the tumultuous period of the 1960s. That decade saw a convergence of militant labor struggles, mass protest against the Vietnam War, civil rights struggles and nationwide urban rebellions. On the basis of affirmative action and similar programs, based on Nixon’s call for “black capitalism,” a thin layer among African-Americans and other minorities was elevated to positions of political power, given academic and professional posts, and brought into the corporate world to help administer capitalism and suppress the masses of working and poor people, black as well as white. They were given access to levels of wealth previously unattainable.

Dyson has made a career out of promoting a racist narrative. His most recent book is titled *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America*. He has virtually nothing to say about Obama’s wars, domestic spying or austerity policies, but praises Obama’s increasingly open invocation of race.

Born in 1958 in Detroit, Dyson came to adulthood just as the policy of racial preferences was taking hold and being integrated into the structure of bourgeois rule in America. He attended the elite Cranbrook School in the affluent Detroit suburb of Bloomfield Hills on an academic scholarship.

He received his master’s and PhD degrees from Princeton University. Since 2007, he has been a professor at Georgetown University in Washington DC. He has authored or edited 18 books.

Dyson has hosted radio shows and served as a commentator for National Public Radio, CNN and MSNBC. The first guest on one of his radio shows was the billionaire media tycoon Oprah Winfrey, to whom he dedicated one of his books.

An associate of Obama, whom he has known since his days in Chicago in the 1990s, and a frequent visitor to the White House, Dyson inhabits a world of genuine privilege, wealth and power that is light years removed from the masses of black people for whom he claims to speak.

His political and ideological outlook is deeply embedded in his social position and the interests of the privileged layers he represents. This layer is obsessed with carving out a bigger share of the wealth monopolized by the top 1 percent of the population. It could not care less about the social and economic distress of the broad mass of working people and youth, black or white.

Dyson’s July 7 piece on the police shootings became the subject of some controversy when it was unceremoniously taken down from the *New York Times* web site and immediately replaced by a different, somewhat toned down version. The initial version was posted just hours before the mass shooting of police in Dallas Thursday night. That event no doubt set off alarm bells and prompted Dyson and the *Times* editors to have second thoughts about some of the article’s most provocative assertions.

The original version was titled “What White America Fails to See.” It began with the profoundly reactionary and incendiary declaration: “It is clear that you, white America, will never understand us. We are a nation of nearly 40 million black souls inside a nation of more than 320 million people.”

The new version added statements of regret over the killing of the officers and featured a new headline, “Death in Black and White.” Among other changes, it shifted the previous opening sentence to the end of the first paragraph and softened it to read: “And I fear now that it is clearer than ever that you, white America, will always struggle to understand us.”

It is indicative of the combination of provocativeness and unseriousness that characterizes Dyson’s work that he so quickly acted to soften his

rhetoric. It took the killing of five white police officers by a black man evidently influenced by the type of racist politics pushed by Dyson to force some degree of awareness of its disastrous implications.

Nevertheless, the ferociously racist line was retained. Among other things, the column as published in last Sunday’s print edition labels all opposition to affirmative action and other forms of racial preference as white racism, depicts Trump as the embodiment of white prejudice, and insists that racism is the overriding cause of police violence.

And it retains the assertion that blacks constitute a separate nation within the United States. Dyson does not think through the implications of his own statements, but they are there nevertheless. If blacks and whites are separate nations, then there is a case for partition or secession. The logic of this argument leads inexorably to the type of bloody sectarian warfare, stoked by US imperialist wars and interventions, that is sweeping the Middle East, Libya and other parts of the world.

In a feature article in the *New York Times*’ “Sunday Review” section of June 24 (“Barack Obama, the President of Black America?”), Dyson hailed Obama’s speech the previous summer following the killing of nine African-Americans at a Charleston, South Carolina church. He wrote: “As the call and response of the black church came full circle, Mr. Obama was at his best when he was at his blackest. It was a rare display of unapologetic race pride.”

(The popular response to that mass shooting of black people in the South by a white supremacist was one of many developments that refute the false presentation promoted by Dyson and the *Times* and reflect the vast and generally healthy changes in racial attitudes in the US over the past 50 years. There was mass revulsion and solidarity with the victims’ families across all ethnic groups—in the South as well as the North. Polls at the time showed that 60 percent of likely US voters supported removing the Confederate flag from the South Carolina capitol, a sentiment to which most politicians, Republicans as well as Democrats, felt obliged to adapt. The flag, which had been kept in place for decades by the political establishment, was taken down).

Leaving aside the absurdity of Dyson hailing the “blackness” of a man whose mother was white, his open celebration and promotion of “racial pride” could have been lifted from a speech by Hitler or Goebbels, who also promoted a politics based on race. Dyson is not a fascist, but his campaign for “blackness” has real consequences. If it is appropriate for blacks, then why not for whites?

Earlier this month, friends and supporters of Dylan Noble, an unarmed white youth killed by police in Fresno, California, held a protest against his murder. They carried Confederate flags and held up a banner proclaiming “White lives matter.” They said they were not racists or white supremacists, but felt that their friend’s death was being overlooked because he was white.

Such events should be taken as a serious warning. The racist filth promoted by Dyson has nothing in common with the struggle for democratic rights and equality. It actually disarms any genuine struggle against racism, which has always been based on opposition to backward conceptions of racial identity that are used to divide working and poor people.

Like most of the identity politics fraternity, Dyson combines strident racist politics with conservative, pro-capitalist economics. His sectarian racial agenda is combined with enthusiastic support for President Obama and his administration’s economic policies, which have had a devastating impact on the working class, particularly the broad mass of black workers and youth.

In the June 24 *Times* piece cited above, Dyson wrote: “We are now approaching the last months of the Obama era. He will be remembered as a great, but flawed, president, and many of those flaws have to do with how he has addressed race—or avoided doing so.

“In his first two years in office, President Obama performed Herculean

deeds in rescuing the banks, restoring the economy, bailing out the automobile industry and getting his signature health care legislation passed. It was an astonishing record of success despite bitter right-wing resistance to his presidency and the alarming racist reaction to a black man being in charge. His black brain and tongue have changed America forever.”

Dyson chides Obama for not being sufficiently up front about his “blackness,” but he has unrestrained praise for his mega-trillion-dollar bailout of the financial aristocracy, his brutal wage-cutting and job-slashing restructuring of the auto industry, and his imposition of a health care “reform” that is cutting health care costs for business and the government, destroying the health benefits of tens of millions of workers, and underwriting windfall profits for the insurance and health care industry.

As for Obama’s endless wars, drone assassinations, indefinite detention policies, mass spying, Dyson generally has nothing to say. His supposed concern for black people does not extend to the people of the African continent who will be brutalized and killed as the United States expands its military operations on that continent.



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