

The New York Times and “white nationalism”

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In the flood of media commentary on the neo-Nazi rampage in Charlottesville and President Trump’s defense of the fascists, the term most frequently used to describe the forces involved is “white nationalists.” The *New York Times* has led the way in the use of this term and the corporate-controlled media more generally has followed its example.

This is a relatively new term in the lexicon of American politics. In the past, these far-right racist and anti-Semitic forces would have been called Nazis, fascists, the Ku Klux Klan or white supremacists. An Internet search shows the *Times* using the term “white nationalism” for the first time in 2014.

Why is the *Times* promoting this term? Wikipedia points out that white supremacist groups generally prefer the term “white nationalism” because of the negative connotations of “white supremacy.” The Wikipedia post on white nationalism notes: “Critics argue that the term ‘white nationalism’ and ideas such as white pride exist solely to provide a sanitized public face for white supremacy...”

So why does the *Times*, the former journalistic flagship of American liberalism and public voice of the Democratic Party, do the neo-Nazi right the favor of adopting its preferred designation?

On Tuesday, the *Times* published a front-page article with the curious headline “Far Right Plans Its Next Moves With New Vigor.” The article makes no attempt to place the emergence of the far right within a broader social, political or historical context. Its main “news” content is a series of quotations from neo-Nazi figures boasting of the growth of their movement and outlining plans for further actions along the lines of the atrocity in Charlottesville.

The uncritical and even respectful tone of the piece is indicated by its opening sentence: “The white supremacists and right-wing extremists who came together over the weekend in Charlottesville, Va., are now headed home, many of them ready and energized, they said, to set their sights on bigger prizes.”

The author quotes Preston Wiginton, “a Texas-based white nationalist,” as calling it “an opportune time” and saying he

intends to hold a “White Lives Matter” march next month on the campus of Texas A&M. It also cites Matthew Heimbach, “a founder of the Nationalist Front, an umbrella organization for the white nationalist movement,” announcing plans to organize against a drive to remove two Confederate statues from public squares in Lexington, Kentucky.

For a number of years, the *Times* has relentlessly promoted various forms of identity politics, more recently and with increasing ferocity, the politics of race. Hardly a day goes by without one or more articles in the *Times* portraying America as a racially polarized society with a white population—especially white workers—seething with hatred for blacks.

There might seem to be a contradiction between the *Times*’ supposedly “progressive” preoccupation with race and insistence on the pervasiveness of white prejudice, and its uncritical and exaggerated presentation of the strength and influence of “white nationalist” groups. But there is no contradiction. The virulent racism of these organizations complements the racist politics promoted by the *Times*. Branding them “white nationalists” plays into the narrative of the newspaper, the Democratic Party and the privileged social forces for which they speak—in the first instance, a narrow elite among African-Americans that is consumed by a striving for greater wealth and status. According to this narrative, all questions must be viewed through the prism of race.

More broadly, the promotion of racial politics reflects the concerns of wealthy social layers over the growth of class consciousness and signs of political radicalization in the working class. Under conditions of ever rising social inequality and growing anger and disgust in the working class with the entire economic and political system—reflected in the 2016 elections in the mass support for Bernie Sanders, who presented himself, falsely, as a socialist and opponent of the “billionaire class”—the *Times* is particularly on guard and prepared to attack anything—a political development, a book, a film—that challenges its racist agenda.

The politics of race, whether in the form of anti-black racism or black nationalism, has long been used as an ideological weapon of the capitalist class to divide the working class and impede the struggle for socialism.

Identity politics, focusing on issues of gender, sexual orientation and race, has been critical to the strategy of the Democratic Party for nearly 50 years. It has been used to provide a supposedly “left” cover for the party’s abandonment of any policy of social reform and to divert social anger away from the capitalist system and the fundamental class divide in society.

In the 2016 campaign, Hillary Clinton and the *Times*, which openly campaigned for her election, ferociously promoted identity politics while attacking Trump from the right as a stooge of Russia. At the same time, the Democratic campaign ignored the social grievances of workers.

Typical of the reactionary gibberish that was being pumped out is a lengthy commentary published by the *Times* on November 1, one week before Election Day, headlined “Behind 2016’s Turmoil, a Crisis of White Identity.” The author, *Times* columnist Amanda Taub, attributed not only the nomination of Trump as Republican presidential candidate, but also political eruptions internationally such as the Brexit vote in Britain and the rise of right-wing nationalism on the European continent, to “the crisis of whiteness.”

“Whiteness, in this context,” she wrote, “is more than just skin color. You could define it as membership in the ‘ethno-national majority,’ but that’s a mouthful. What it really means is the privilege of not being defined as the ‘other.’”

Since Trump’s inauguration, the Democrats have centered their opposition to Trump on appeals, not to working-class anger over his attacks on immigrants, democratic rights and health care, but to dissatisfaction within powerful sections of the military/intelligence establishment over Trump’s reluctance to continue and escalate the confrontation with Russia.

Now that the political crisis has exploded and exposed the occupant of the White House as a proto-fascist, the Democrats and the bulk of the corporate media are rushing to step up the promotion of racial politics in order to prevent the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class based on a fight for socialism.

On Tuesday, the same day as the article boosting the pretensions of the far right, the *Times* ran an op-ed piece by its resident “expert” on racial matters, Georgetown University Professor, author and TV commentator Michael Eric Dyson. The piece, titled “Charlottesville and the Bigotocracy,” was typical Dyson fare—a rant about American “white supremacy” and “the wages of whiteness.”

Dyson, who lives in a world of wealth and privilege a

universe away from the conditions of the mass of black workers and youth, and who recently authored a book hailing Barack Obama’s “black presidency,” wrote: “If such heinous behavior is met by white silence, it will only cement the perception that as long as most white folk are not immediately at risk, then all is relatively well.”

He did not mention that the antifascist protester who was murdered by one of the Nazi demonstrators was white, as were the bulk of the counter-protesters in Charlottesville.

In June of 2016, the *Times* published a feature article by Dyson that praised Obama’s speech the previous summer following the killing of nine African-Americans at a Charleston, South Carolina church. Dyson wrote that Obama “was at his best when he was at his blackest. It was a rare display of unapologetic race pride.”

The *World Socialist Web Site*, responding to Dyson’s article, wrote: “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?”

In the wake of the events in Charlottesville, the prophetic character of this warning is all too clear. To the extent that right-wing demagogues and pseudo-populists are able to influence desperate and disoriented layers of the working class that have been devastated by decades of capitalist deindustrialization and social counterrevolution, the purveyors of racial politics bear a major share of the political responsibility.



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