

Perspectives for the coming revolution in America: Race, class and the fight for socialism

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This is an edited version of a report delivered by Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Joseph Kishore to meetings in Michigan and California on the New York Times' "1619 Project."

The title for this meeting is "Perspectives for the Coming Revolution in America." It begins with the understanding, broadly felt by a growing section of workers and youth throughout the world, that we live in a revolutionary period.

"The most indubitable feature of a revolution," Trotsky wrote in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, "is the direct interference of the masses in historical events. In ordinary times the state, be it monarchical or democratic, elevates itself above the nation, and history is made by specialists in that line of business—kings, ministers, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, journalists. But at those crucial moments when the old order becomes no longer endurable to the masses, they break over the barriers excluding them from the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives, and create by their own interference the initial groundwork for a new régime."

Such a period we are now entering. In a recent commentary published by the Center for Strategic & International Studies, a leading geostrategic think tank for the American ruling class, Samuel Brannen, the director of the "Risk and Foresight Group," defines the present period as "The Age of Leaderless Revolution." He points to the mass uprisings and protests in recent weeks in Lebanon, Iraq, Chile, Spain, Hong Kong, Ecuador, Honduras, Haiti, Egypt and Algeria.

Brannen does not mention, but one should add, the significant growth of the class struggle here in the United States, including major strikes over the past month by GM autoworkers and Chicago teachers. Polls show, particularly among young people, a sharp shift to the left and growing interest in socialism and hostility to capitalism.

"The world is experiencing," Brannen writes, "the volatility of what my late colleague Zbigniew Brzezinski identified in 2008 as a 'global political awakening'—a sweeping revolution the likes of which we had never before seen." This "awakening" is fueled by the connectivity of the world's population in a way that is unprecedented. "The ability for individuals to connect, to inspire and coordinate millions onto the streets, is without precedent."

Brannen warns, "The risks and implications are mounting for governments, businesses, and organizations of every type. It is a question of when, not if, the digital flash mob comes for those in power."

Brannen defines these revolutions as "leaderless," however, and holds out the hope that they "can be co-opted for... good," by which he means channeled in a way that does not threaten the interests of the ruling elite.

The question of leadership is indeed the central issue. As Trotsky stressed in 1938, "The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership." Building a leadership, developing within

the working class and youth a political movement conscious of its aims, is a complicated process. It requires a protracted struggle against all those who would seek to pollute consciousness, to "co-opt" and divert social anger and opposition.

The Times' "1619 Project"

It is within this context that the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality decided to hold a series of meetings on the *New York Times*' "1619 Project." Understanding and combating the conceptions advanced in this "project," which is being aggressively promoted at schools and campuses throughout the country, is of immense importance for the working class and youth.

What is involved is a form of historical revisionism and contemporary politics that is aimed at elevating race as the central social and political category—indeed, that is aimed at promoting racial conflicts. At the very point that masses of workers and youth all over the world are entering into struggle over issues of class, there is a conscious effort to divide and disorient.

One must state at the outset: there is nothing left-wing about this campaign. It shares more in common with the fascistic reaction of Donald Trump than anything traditionally associated with progressive politics.

The argument of the *Times* is that the central problem in the United States, in its history and in its present, the "root," is the "racism that we still cannot purge from this nation to this day," in the words of Nikole Hannah-Jones, the lead author in the *Times* project. "Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country," she writes.

This "original sin" of American society is "endemic"—that is, it is a disease embedded in a particular people that has not, and by extension cannot, be purged. At a meeting at New York University on November 18, Hannah-Jones declared that racism among white people is a "psychosis," presumably embedded deep in the irrational mind of white people.

It is not just that racism exists, but that the conflict between races is the basic and enduring issue. For the *Times*, the history of the United States is a history of the struggle between races, between "white people," who have all benefited from the oppression of "black people," first through slavery, then through segregation and now through "white supremacy," and their black victims. History is defined in terms of the conflict between races, with common interests shared only by individuals who are categorized by their race.

It is not possible in the course of a single meeting to review all the historical falsifications that flow from this analysis. We have already

published on the *World Socialist Web Site* detailed replies to the *Times'* account of the American Revolution and the Civil War, two monumental events in world history that initiated and completed the bourgeois democratic revolution in America. (See, "Slavery and the American Revolution: A Response to the New York Times 1619 Project" and "The 'Irrepressible Conflict:' Slavery, the Civil War and America's Second Revolution") We have also published three excellent interviews with American historians James McPherson, James Oakes and Victoria Bynum that address these themes.

One element of the *Times'* attitude toward these revolutions is important to underscore in relation to the themes of this lecture—namely, the hostility that this interpretation of history displays toward the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is the intellectual and political revolution in thought, arising out of immense advances in science during the 16th and 17th centuries, that emphasized the ability of humans to understand the world through reason and reconstruct it on rational foundations. The two figures in the history of bourgeois politics in the United States most closely associated with the Enlightenment—Jefferson and Lincoln—are the two particular targets of the *Times'* historical falsification.

Ibram Kendi, in his book *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, a major inspiration for the 1619 Project, denigrates the Enlightenment as a "metaphor for Europeanness, and therefore Whiteness... Enlightenment ideas gave legitimacy to this long-held racist 'partiality,' the connection between lightness and Whiteness and reason, on the one hand, and between darkness and Blackness and ignorance, on the other." [*Stamped from the Beginning*, pp. 80-81]

This hostility to the Enlightenment is the provenance of the far-right, not the left, but it is connected to a contempt for rationality and democratic principles that characterizes the modern pseudo-left, a theme to which I will return.

To carry forward the *Times'* narrative of history into the latter portion of the 19th century and the 20th century requires that the *Times* completely ignore and cover up the profound social and political developments that transformed the freed slaves into a critical section of the working class. It is necessary to wash away from history the history of the class struggle, and therefore the history of the African-American working class.

In the *Times'* account, there simply is no working class. The word "class" does not make an appearance in the entire introductory historical essay by Hannah-Jones. The term "White Americans" appears 15 times, "White people" 19 times, "Black Americans" 28 times, and "Black people" 43 times. Yet "working class" appears zero times.

If one were to base a curriculum on the *Times* account, as schools and colleges throughout the country are being urged to do, this new "narrative" of American history would remove all reference to the insurrectionary and violent class battles that have characterized American capitalism since it emerged fully in the decades following the Civil War. The purpose is as much about cutting workers and youth off from these traditions of class struggle as it is about establishing an alternative narrative of enduring and unending racial conflict.

Absent from the *Times* account is any mention of the Populist movement in the south, which sought in the decades following the Civil War to unite freed blacks with poor whites. The *Times* cannot, therefore, account for the origins of Jim Crow segregation and the KKK, the conscious response of the ruling class to the threat of an alliance of blacks and whites. There is no mention of Tom Watson, the leader of the Populist movement, who early in his career addressed his appeal to both races:

You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism which enslaves you both. You are deceived and blinded that you may not

see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system that beggars you both. [Quoted in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, p. 63]

The historian of the South, C. Vann Woodward, noted in his essential account of the origins and development of Jim Crow segregation, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, that the emergence and development of the Populist movement demonstrated that the policies of segregation and racism were not a product of "the immutable 'folkways' of the South," and "the belief that they are immutable and unchangeable is not supported by history." [*Ibid.*, p. 65]

The deliberate and systematic promotion of racial divisions, including the use of the KKK as the militant arm of the southern reactionaries in the Democratic Party, was rooted in both the fear of social unrest and the emergence of American imperialism toward the end of the 19th century. The militarist adventures that marked this emergence, beginning with the Spanish-American War of 1898, Woodward explained, "suddenly brought under the jurisdiction of the United States some eight million people of the colored races, 'a varied assortment of inferior races,' as the Nation described them, 'which of course could not be allowed to vote...'"

At the very time that imperialism was sweeping the country, the doctrine of racism reached a crest of acceptability and popularity among respectable scholarly and intellectual circles. At home and abroad biologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, as well as journalists and novelists, gave support to the doctrine that races were discrete entities and that "Anglo-Saxon" or "Caucasian" was the superior of them all. [*Ibid.*, 73-74]

To refer to any of the monumental class struggles that emerged in the aftermath of the Civil War, beginning with the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 through to the sit-down strikes of the 1930s, would require that the *Times* acknowledge that the fight against social inequality—and the fight against racism—became centered in the struggle to unify the working class against the corporations and against capitalism.

The *Times* makes no mention of the Industrial Workers of the World, which was established in 1905 and organized a series of militant industrial struggles and strikes in the early part of the 20th century. At its founding convention in June of 1905, Big Bill Haywood called the organization of the IWW, in a historical reference to the American Revolution, the "Continental Congress of the working class."

"The American Federation of Labor," Haywood declared, "which presumes to be the labor movement of this country, is not a working class movement. It does not represent the working class. There are organizations that are affiliated, but loosely affiliated with the AF of L, which in their constitution and by-laws prohibit the initiation or conferring the obligation on a colored man; that prohibit the conferring of the obligation on foreigners. What we want to establish at this time is a labor organization that will open wide its doors to every man that earns his livelihood either by his brain or his muscle." [See, "Opening Convention of the IWW"]

The *Times* makes no mention of the founding of the Socialist Party of America in 1901. Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs declared in 1903, "I have said and say again that, properly speaking, there is no Negro question outside of the labor question—the working class struggle... Our position as Socialists and as a party is perfectly plain. We simply say: 'The class struggle is colorless.' The capitalist, white, black and other shades, are on one side and the workers, white, black and all other colors, on the other side." [Debs, "The Negro in the Class Struggle"]

Nowhere in the *Times* revision of American history is there discussion of the “Great Migration” of African-American workers to the north, the emergence of the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the monumental class battles of the 1930s and 1940s, which required a fight to unify the working class against the efforts of the ruling class to divide them along racial and ethnic lines. On the changes in consciousness of workers forged in these struggles, the great socialist leader James P. Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism, wrote:

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.

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. [Cannon, “The Coming American Revolution”]

And, of course, there is no room for the worldwide impact of the Russian Revolution, which inspired millions of workers with its call for the unity of the entire working class, of every race and nationality, in the struggle against capitalist oppression and imperialist war. The call that concluded the Communist Manifesto, “Workers of the World, Unite!” was realized in practice by the working class of Russia, led by the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky. The Russian Revolution had a powerful impact on the consciousness of workers of all races in the United States.

From the Civil Rights movement to Affirmative Action

None of this can be mentioned because it cuts across the claim that the United States is riven by irreconcilable racial antagonisms, that the workers who are white are irredeemably racist.

To understand the origins and political function of the conceptions promoted by the *Times* it is necessary to understand the way in which the ruling class, and, in particular, the Democratic Party, responded to the threat of social revolution that emerged in the 20th century. In the 1930s, with the example of the Russian Revolution fresh in their minds and amidst a growing working class insurgency within the United States, American liberalism, under the Democratic Party administration of Franklin Roosevelt, fashioned the “New Deal,” a reform agenda that implemented restraints on the power of big business.

As Trotsky explained at the time, “America’s wealth permits Roosevelt his experiments.”

roomAlready by the mid-1940s, however, under the impact of the Second World War, liberalism had begun to shift. Alan Brinkley, in his book *The End of Reform*, notes that by 1945, the policies of the Democratic Party had begun to shift “from a preoccupation with ‘reform’ (with a set of essentially class-based issues centered around confronting the problem of monopoly and economic disorder) and toward a preoccupation with ‘rights’ (a commitment to the liberties and entitlements of individuals and thus to the liberation of oppressed people and groups). ‘Rights-based’ liberalism was in some respects part of a retreat from a broad range of economic issues involving the structure of the industrial economy and the distribution of wealth and power within it.” [*The End of Reform*, p. 170].

However, ruling class policy following the Second World War still maintained significant redistributive measures, including high taxes on the wealthy. The top marginal tax rate for the wealthiest Americans was 90 percent under Truman and Eisenhower. In 1964, LBJ announced that the fight against poverty “would prove the success of our system,” that is capitalism, which was followed by the introduction of Medicare, Medicaid and food stamps.

This, in fact, proved to be the last gasp of American liberalism. By the late 1960s, the post-war boom had begun to unravel and the policies of the Democratic Party and the ruling class as a whole underwent a further lurch to the right. The “Great Society” and the “War on Poverty” were shipwrecked by the Vietnam War and the protracted decline in the global position of American capitalism. The period of significant social reform proved to be very short-lived.

The move toward a policy of social counterrevolution coincided with a deliberate strategy aimed at elevating sections of the middle class within minority populations into the institutions of class rule.

Here it is critical to understand the significance of the transformation that took place in the 1960s and 70s, from the Civil Rights movement to identity politics. The Civil Rights movement was part of a broader wave of social unrest in the United States in the 1960s, including major strike action by the working class, the Vietnam antiwar protest movement, and the ghetto uprisings in major cities throughout the US.

It is a striking fact that, in an essay supposedly dedicated to the history of race relations in the United States, Hannah-Jones hardly mentions the Civil Rights movement. The name Martin Luther King, Jr. does not appear, nor that of Malcolm X.

This is for good reason. King’s own writings during this period are themselves a refutation of the racist narrative of the *Times*, which places all “white Americans” and “white people” on the side of racist reaction and bigotry, benefiting and supporting the lynching of blacks.

In a speech before a convention of the AFL-CIO in 1961, King attacked those who insist on the “intrinsic differences” between the races. “There is no intrinsic difference, as I have tried to demonstrate. Differences have been contrived by outsiders who seek to impose disunity by dividing brothers because the color of their skin has a different shade.” [Speech before the Fourth Constitutional Convention of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, Bal Harbour, Florida, 11 December 1961]

Writing in 1964, King noted that a majority of whites throughout the country supported voting rights, housing and integrated schools and restaurants throughout the US. He proposed that same year a “Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged.” He argued, “The moral justification for special measures for Negroes is rooted in the robberies inherent in the institution of slavery. Many poor whites, however, were the derivative victims of slavery [again, contrary to the *Times*]. As long as labor was cheapened by the involuntary servitude of the black man, the freedom of white labor, especially in the South, was little more than a myth... To this day the white poor also suffer deprivation and the humiliation of poverty if not of color. They are chained by the weight of discrimination, though its badge of degradation does not mark them.” [*Why We Can’t Wait*, pp.

The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 specifically sought to embrace white workers in the South and in Appalachia. At the same time, King came out ever more forcefully in opposition to the Vietnam War. He was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

King was a social democrat and not a Marxist. He expressed the view that guaranteed employment and basic social rights for all workers, regardless of race, was possible in the "richest nation on earth" through capitalist reforms. By the late 60s, however, the relative position of American capitalism had already begun its protracted decline. Three years after King's assassination, the Nixon administration ended dollar-gold convertibility, the cornerstone of the Bretton Woods monetary system set up in the aftermath of the Second World War.

As the ruling class shifted to the offensive, beginning the process of tearing up all the gains won by workers in an earlier period, it very consciously adopted a policy of integrating and elevating a privileged section of the upper-middle class into positions of power.

The policy was announced by none other than Richard Nixon, who declared in response to the urban rebellions of the late 1960s that "Black Americans—no more than white Americans—do not want more government programs... They want the pride and the self-respect and the dignity that can only come if they have an equal chance to own their own homes, to own their own businesses, to be managers and executives as well as workers, to have a piece of the action in the exciting ventures of private enterprise." [Speech accepting the Republican Party nomination, August 8, 1968]

The *New York Times*, expressing the consensus that was developing within the ruling class, declared that Nixon's position "on the need for the development of black capitalism and ownership in the ghetto could prove to be more constructive than anything yet said by other presidential candidates on the crisis of the cities."

Thus began the policies of Affirmative Action and racial quotas, of the promotion of a layer of black businessmen and politicians to preside over an immense increase of social inequality. Nixon expressed the view that "we sooner or later must bring those who threaten [domestic peace] back within the system." He established through an executive order the Office of Minority Business Enterprise for this purpose. Over the next several years, a layer of the black middle class was brought into positions of political power, including Coleman Young, who became mayor of Detroit and, over the next twenty years, oversaw a massive deindustrialization of the city.

A decade after Nixon's election in 1968, the Supreme Court upheld Affirmative Action policies for the first time, in the 1978 case of *California v. Bakke*. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall argued in his opinion, "It is because of a legacy of unequal treatment that we now must permit the institutions of this society to give consideration to race in making decisions about who will hold positions of influence, affluence and prestige in America."

That is, not social equality, but the equal distribution of positions of power and "affluence" among races and minority groups. Not programs to uplift all poor people, or to improve the conditions of the entire working class, but the selective elevation of a small minority to preside over deindustrialization and the destruction of the living conditions of the vast majority.

This was an international phenomenon. In an analysis of Affirmative Action measures in the US, India and South Africa, University of Michigan economist Thomas Weisskopf noted: "The most important purpose that can be served by ethnicity-based [positive discrimination] in admissions to [higher educational institutions] is not to redistribute educational opportunities from the rich to the poor. Instead it is to reduce identity-based differentials in access to the upper strata of society, that is, to integrate the societal elite." ["Rethinking Affirmative Action in

Admissions to Higher Educational Institutions," quoted in *For Discrimination: Race, Affirmative Action, and the Law*, Randall Kennedy, p. 86]

Already by the late 1970s, the impact of these and other measures adopted by the ruling class had produced a significant growth of social inequality among African Americans.

Black sociologist William Julius Wilson pointed as early as 1978, the same year as the Bakke decision and a decade after the assassination of King, to the development of "a deepening economic schism... in the black community, with the poor blacks falling further and further behind middle- and upper-income blacks... Class has become more important than race in determining black life-chances." ["The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions," quoted in *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race and Ethnicity in the United States Since 1938*, p. 273]

Such conceptions continue to be at the center of Democratic Party politics today. Democratic Party candidate Cory Booker put it bluntly in an interview with "Democracy Now" last week, when he criticized "a lot of people [who] want to talk to you about the wealth gap, the wealth gap, the wealth gap. Look, there are a lot of people in my community that want to be entrepreneurs, that want to be millionaires. And so, I always talk about the wealth gap, yeah, but what we really need to be talking about is the opportunity gap and to make sure that everybody has equal opportunity to start a business, to be innovators, to participate in the new job booms of the future and the new businesses of the future."

The political and theoretical origins of racist politics

The shift in ruling class policy from reform to social counterrevolution coincided with and was integral to a rightward movement within sections of the upper-middle class of all races. The promotion of a politics based on racial and gender identity became the hallmark of pseudo-left and ex-Marxist intellectuals whose response to the wave of social upheavals and class struggles between 1968 and 1975 was to repudiate any association with working class politics.

Herein lie the origins of "intersectionality theory," "critical race theory," "identity politics," "whiteness studies" and associated schools. The theoretical foundation of these tendencies is rooted in an idealist rejection of Marxism.

The great advance of Marxism was the materialist conception of history, the understanding that at the foundation of society are definite forms of production, and that to the phases in the development of these forms of production correspond definite social, that is, class relations. In particular, modern capitalist society is characterized by private ownership of the means of production, which are in the hands primarily of the owners of the banks and giant corporations.

The working class as a class is united in its relationship to this process of production. It is that class of people, today the majority of the world's population, that must sell its labor power on the market for a wage. The fundamental unity of the working class, across nationalities, races, ethnicities, genders or any other category, is defined by this relationship.

The politics of race and identity begins not with the process of production and the objective interests, independent of thought, that are determined by this production process, but by racial divisions. Where does racism itself come from? It is "endemic," the "original sin," embodied in the "DNA" of white people, per the *Times*. History is not the transition from one form of social organization to another—from slavery to feudalism, then capitalism and finally to socialism—but merely different forms in the eternal persistence of racial antagonisms.

An important document marking the repudiation by middle class groups of Marxism and an orientation to the working class is the statement of the so-called Combahee River Collective, a black lesbian feminist organization formed in 1974 led by Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier and Beverly Smith. The statement, published in April 1977, a year before the Bakke decision, claimed to be an extension of Marxist theory, but was in fact a direct repudiation of all its fundamental conceptions.

To this day, the Combahee statement, which contains the first use of the term “identity politics,” is regularly cited by organizations of the pseudo-left as a major turning point. It was published as the centerpiece of a 2017 book (*How We Get Free*) by Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, a tenured professor at Princeton and at that time a leading member of the International Socialist Organization, which dissolved itself into the Democratic Party earlier this year. The various caucuses of the Democratic Socialists of America that are centered on issues of race and gender cite the statement as a key document.

The purpose of the collective, the authors wrote, was to develop an “integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.” The most significant “oppressions,” however, were those based on race and gender. “Black women’s extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes... Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule.”

Underscoring the self-obsessed character of the new politics of the upper-middle class, the authors wrote, “The focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression.”

The aim was not social equality and the liberation of all mankind, but my own personal advancement, leveraging various categories of identity to achieve positions of power and privilege. There is an analogy to the social motivations behind the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy and its attacks on the program and perspective of permanent revolution.

“Not everything for world revolution,” Trotsky said of the thinking of the petty Soviet official, “Something for me too.”

The Combahee statement concludes with the following, which sums up its attitude not simply to white workers, but to the working class as a whole. “In her introduction to *Sisterhood is Powerful* Robin Morgan writes: ‘I haven’t the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest power.’”

Poor whites, and particularly white men, were categorized under the general heading of “white male rule.” “White people,” irretrievably racist, are the “embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest power.”

Consider the period in which this was being written. The Combahee collective was formed in 1974, the year of the largest strike movement in the United States since the 1950s, including a 28-day strike of coal miners in West Virginia and other states. The statement was written less than one year before the 1977-78 coal miners, strike, waged in defiance of the invocation of Taft-Hartley by the Democratic Party administration of Jimmy Carter. The workers involved in these struggles and many others were in their majority white men. Were they not then part of “reactionary-vested-interest power?” Was their effort to maintain their jobs and living conditions an expression of a longing for “white privilege?”

The rejection of a politics based on class, and with it an ever more direct opposition among sections of the so-called “left” to the theoretical conceptions of Marxism, was an international phenomenon. The rise to prominence of figures like Michael Foucault in France, a major inspiration for intersectionality and critical race theory, was part of a broader turn away from Marxism.

Foucault, a pupil of the Stalinist Louis Althusser and once a member of the French Communist Party, developed in the 1960s and 1970s a theoretical framework that rejected the primacy of class conflict in favor of the “multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate” [*The Order of Things*, 1966]. Foucault rejected the notion of an objective truth, existing outside of language and “discourse.” Truth and power are constructed through language, through ideas, rather than existing in the material relations of production.

“Force relations” based on race or other categories, conditioned by thought, are no less fundamental—indeed are more fundamental—than the exploitation inherent in the capitalist system, which in any case cannot be said to exist outside of language and “discourse.” He considered talk of the objective interests of a class to be invalid, since there are no “force relations” that exist outside of our construction of them through language.

Such conceptions were part of a broader rejection of a politics rooted in class. To the extent that “socialism” meant anything, it was to be divorced from the class struggle, from the interests of the working class. Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their influential 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* wrote: “What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of Revolution, with a capital ‘r,’ as the founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another...” [*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 2]

The social basis of pseudo-left identity politics

The theoretical conceptions developed by the new proponents of racial and gender politics became anchored to definite social interests, the interest of a privileged layer of the upper-middle class, including, but not limited to, the tenured professors who populate the humanities departments of the major universities, where anti-Marxism has become a requirement of the profession.

The past four decades have seen a massive redistribution of wealth from the working class of all races to the rich. Since 1980, the share of the national income going to the bottom 50 percent of the population has fallen from 20 percent to 12 percent, while the income share of the top one percent has risen from 12 percent to 20 percent.

However, the perpetual rise in the stock markets and the intensification in the exploitation of the working class have benefited more than the super-rich. A layer of the upper-middle class, the “next 9 percent,” that is, the top 10 percent excluding the top one percent, has also benefited. This layer, with income over about \$150,000 a year, has seen its share of national income increase from 23 percent in 1970 to nearly 28 percent today. [Piketty and Saez, 2017]

The growth of inequality within minority populations is particularly significant. The richest 10 percent of African-Americans owns 75.3 percent of the wealth owned by all African-Americans, and the top one percent owns 40.5 percent. The bottom 60 percent combined have zero net wealth. This is a massive increase since the early 1990s, when the share of wealth going to the top one percent of African-Americans was less than 25 percent.

Toward the end of her essay, Hannah-Jones declares that over the past half century, “black Americans have made astounding progress, not only for ourselves but also for all Americans.” The vast majority of “black Americans,” as with the vast majority of the working class as a whole, have, in fact, suffered a historic retrogression in their conditions of life. A small section, however, has made significant “progress.”

In 1957, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier wrote of the “black bourgeoisie,” an initial analysis of the emerging layer of middle class and

upper-middle class blacks. The conditions of life for the black elite have risen to levels that massively eclipse those that prevailed in the time of Frazier. The outlook of this “black bourgeoisie” is expressed by individuals like Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose *We Were Eight Years in Power* is a celebration of the Obama administration, which oversaw the largest transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich in American history.

The politics of racial, gender and other forms of identity is the politics of the upper-middle class, of all races and genders. It is a mechanism for dividing the working class, subordinating it to the right-wing, pro-war politics of the Democratic Party, and a mechanism for carrying out bitter struggles within the top ten percent for access to positions in academia, corporate boardrooms and the state.

In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this layer of the upper-middle class moved further to the right, openly repudiating any association with socialism and opposition to imperialism. The *Times*’ reframing of American history along racial lines is entirely compatible with its absolute support for the military and the CIA in the present conflict within the state apparatus. Not only is this backing for US imperialism congruent with the aggressive promotion of the racist politics of the pseudo-left in its rewriting of American history, the two are inextricably connected.

The right-wing character of racist politics

The theoretical and political conceptions promoted by this layer have absolutely nothing to do with “left” politics. Indeed, the irrationalist, anti-Enlightenment, anti-Marxist and anti-working-class perspective developed over the past half-century has brought the pseudo-left into increasing alignment with the conceptions and politics of the far-right. The obsession with race, the interpretation of history in terms of the conflict of races, the categorization of society into “white America” and “black America,” “white people” and “black people”—this is not the language of the left, of progressive social reform, let alone socialist revolution.

It was the French aristocrat Artur de Gobineau, who exercised enormous influence on Hitler and the Nazi ideologists, who most consistently developed, in the mid-19th century, the racist theory of history. The historian Richard Wolin, in a book analyzing the postmodernists’ “intellectual romance with fascism,” notes that “Gobineau’s ingenious strategy was to reestablish the Counter-Enlightenment worldview on pseudoscientific foundations by employing the concept of *race* as a universal key to historical development. Racially based taxonomies of human types were already widely used by anthropologists and natural historians. But Gobineau was the first to apply race systematically to the study of history as a type of hidden master code.” [Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason*, pp. 289-90]

And what is the *Times* 1619 Project if not an effort to “apply race systematically to the study of history?” Wolin also notes that the theoreticians of the “New Right” have adapted themselves to the language and style of the pseudo-left. The New Right in France, he writes, “has shifted its emphasis from the concept of ‘race’ to that of ‘culture.’ Abandoning outmoded arguments for biological racism, it moved in the direction of what might be called a cultural racism...”

Sounding like a liberal’s liberal, [New Right theorist] de Benoist embraced what might be best described as a nonhierarchical, “differentialist racism.” No culture was intrinsically better than any other. Instead, they were all “different,” and these differences should be respected and preserved. Practically speaking, this

meant that the place where Algerians should enjoy civil liberties was Algeria. “France for the French”—an old racist slogan during the Dreyfus Affair (and resurrected during the 1930s)—Europe for the Europeans, and so on. As de Benoist explained in the early 1980s, “The truth is that the people must preserve and cultivate their differences... Immigration merits condemnation because it strikes a blow at the identity of the host culture as well as the immigrants’ identity.” [Ibid, p. 268]

What separates such a conception from the position of Stacey Abrams, a rising star in the Democratic Party, who wrote in a defense of identity politics published in *Foreign Affairs* earlier this year that racial groups have “intrinsic differences?” This is not to say that the Democratic Party is a fascist organization. However, ideas have consequences, or, rather, political ideas reflect the movement of social forces. And the social forces behind the politics of racial division are right-wing.

The insistence on the unbridgeable chasm between blacks and whites does not reflect reality. While racism exists, attitudes toward race have transformed enormously over the past half-century. Globalization has integrated the working class of the entire world into a single process of production. The masses of workers and youth who are being driven into struggle throughout the world are not motivated by issues centered on race, gender, age, sexual orientation or any other identity, but by issues of class. The obsessive focus on race and racial division by the *Times* and the Democratic Party will only play into the hands of Trump and his fascist advisors.

The world situation is fraught with immense danger, but also immense possibilities. The Trump administration is part of the rise of far-right and fascist forces throughout the world. In the face of growing social unrest, the ruling elites are resorting ever more openly to authoritarian methods of rule, resurrecting all the political filth of the 20th century. Geopolitical antagonisms are mounting, and the ruling elites of all the major capitalist countries are remilitarizing in preparation for world war.

Another social force, however, is emerging—the working class. In the fight against social inequality, war and authoritarianism, the working class and youth cannot allow themselves to be subordinated to any faction of the ruling elite. The working class cannot allow itself to be divided along national or racial lines. It must reject the chauvinism of Trump as well as the racial politics of the Democrats.

The fight for the right to a job, to health care, to public education, to a livable income, to a secure retirement; the fight against war and authoritarianism; the fight against the return of fascism is a fight against capitalism and for socialism. It requires a frontal attack on the wealth and privileges of the corporate and financial elite, a massive redistribution of wealth, and the transformation of the giant banks and corporations into publicly-controlled utilities, run on the basis of social need and not private profit.

Against the proponents of racial conflict and division, the working class must respond with the methods of class war and socialist revolution.



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