

Introduction to new pamphlet from Mehring Books: *Marxism vs. Critical Race Theory*

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Published below is the author's introduction to a new *World Socialist Web Site* pamphlet that is now available from Mehring Books. The pamphlet contains the lecture by Tom Carter, "The Ideological Foundations of Critical Race Theory," as well as additional essays that together present a criticism of critical race theory and identity politics from the left.

The lecture that follows was presented in August 2021 at the summer school of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States and published shortly afterwards on the *World Socialist Web Site*. Since that time, "critical race theory" has remained a polarizing topic in official political discourse, despite a generally poor understanding of its essential philosophical, historical, and political content.

Critical race theory, as the lecture explains, is a "body of academic writing that emerged in the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which combines postmodernism and subjective idealist philosophy with historical revisionism, racial sectarianism, and an orientation to the Democratic Party and its satellites."

Since the lecture was given, the Democratic Party and the political forces in its orbit have increased their efforts to impose the reactionary framework of identity politics—and racial politics in particular—onto all social, historical, cultural, and political questions. Meanwhile, in the name of combating critical race theory, the Republican Party has doubled down on its fascist demands for a purge of all "unpatriotic" teachings from schools and universities.

In this context, theoretical and political questions that the lecture addresses are as timely as ever. The two additional essays included in this pamphlet, written after the lecture, return to these questions in light of more recent developments.

The lecture presents a critique of critical race theory from the left, overturning the generally accepted misconception that contemporary identity politics is somehow "left-wing." It contrasts genuine left-wing thought with the ideological foundations, methods, and trajectory of critical race theory. This critique is based on the historical tradition of Marxism and the independent interests of the international working class in the global struggle against capitalism and for socialism.

The lecture speaks, for example, to the issues raised in the wake of the murder of black FedEx worker Tyre Nichols by a squad of black police officers in Memphis, Tennessee in January 2023, after

which the practitioners of racial politics tied themselves into knots in an effort to explain this episode of wanton police brutality as a product of "white supremacy."

"By explaining the epidemic of police brutality as the result of generalized and pervasive racism on the part of all white people," the lecture explains, "critical race theory shifts the blame from the ruling class and the existing social order onto the mass of working people who are white, who are in no way responsible for police brutality and who themselves frequently fall victim to it."

Most prominently, the conceptions associated with critical race theory have found reflection in the *New York Times*' 1619 Project, a tendentious revision of American history that diminishes the progressive content of the American Revolution and Civil War and portrays modern American society as irreconcilably divided between hostile races. [1]

The first of the two additional essays included in this pamphlet was prompted by the *New York Times*' full-throated celebration of the pageantry of the British monarchy following the death of Queen Elizabeth II in September 2022. The essay identifies and explores the many contradictions in which a section of the American political establishment has entangled itself in the course of its desperate pivot to identity politics.

It bears emphasizing that the critique of racial politics from the left presented in this pamphlet has nothing in common with the attacks on critical race theory from the right by Republican-controlled state legislatures, such as Florida's "Stop Woke Act," which are directed at transforming public schools and universities into centers for flag-waving patriotic indoctrination. In practice, these laws mean that teachers and professors run the risk of persecution not just for teaching critical race theory, but for teaching any of the history of the world that does not conform to the nationalist mythology of the Republican authorities.

As the lecture explains, the Democrat-aligned proponents of racial sectarianism and their Republican detractors represent two reactionary camps, each with its own revisionist mythology, with each camp feeding off the popular resentment generated by the other.

The "America First" mythology of the Republicans presents American history as a struggle for the supremacy of Christian fundamentalist theology, unrestricted "free market capitalism," and the glorious American military. To this mythology, critical race theory counterposes a mythology premised on a struggle between irreconcilably antagonistic races, in which one race has

always “fought back alone,” in the words of 1619 Project creator Nikole Hannah-Jones.

Neither camp can articulate what was progressive in the American Revolution and Civil War. Neither camp can deal honestly with the past, and neither can deal honestly with the present. Both camps deny and conceal the objective economic and social factors that are central to understanding American and world history as well as the dynamic of the present crisis.

The lecture places critical race theory in its historical context. It emerged and took hold in the period of reaction during and after the liquidation of the Soviet Union. This was a period in American academia of capitalist triumphalism, demoralization, and disorientation—and a heyday for postmodern anti-Marxism, which rejects the working class and rigorous scientific thought in favor of subjective irrationalism and a personal search for “identity.” Critical race theory was just one of many variations on these themes.

The politics associated with critical race theory fall under the definition of the term “pseudo-left,” as it has been developed on the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Pseudo-left” means politics rooted in the interests of privileged sections of the upper-middle class, which posture as “left” but are anti-Marxist, anti-socialist, and pro-imperialist. Such politics are not based on the independent interests of the international working class, but on various “identities,” which serve as levers to access privilege within the framework of capitalism. [2]

“As a theoretical tendency,” the lecture explains, “critical race theory is quite compatible with nationalism, capitalism, and the ideological requirements of US imperialism.”

This assessment of critical race theory and its associated brand of politics is perhaps nowhere more starkly confirmed than by the ease with which the *New York Times*, following the publication of the 1619 Project, has aligned itself with the far-right racist ideology of Ukrainian nationalism, a subject taken up by the second additional essay included in this pamphlet.

To the essentially reactionary politics of race, the lecture counterposes the history and traditions of the Marxist movement. “Socialism,” the lecture states, “has always stood for equality, and the struggle of scientific socialists for equality around the world stretches back a century and a half before the phrase ‘critical race theory’ was ever uttered.”

This pamphlet is being published in the midst of a bloody escalation of the conflict between NATO and Russia over Ukraine, as humanity continues to be ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic, ecological catastrophe, and political, economic, social, and cultural dysfunction. But for Marxists, the objective conditions have never been more favorable in history to unite humanity in a progressive and egalitarian global culture, which can work to put an end to war, borders, prejudice, and exploitation.

A rough translation of any document into or out of any language is now available with the tap of the thumb. According to recent statistics, 85 percent of the global population of 8 billion has access to a smartphone. From music and dance to politics and history, virtually the whole universe of accumulated human knowledge, experience, and culture is more and more readily accessible—including the *World Socialist Web Site*, which

celebrated its 25th year of continuous publication this year.

The lecture explains: “Socialists around the world are engaged in the complex and challenging struggle to unite the working class—including people of different nationalities, genders, languages, religions, ages, and customs—for a common struggle for peace, progress, and equality.”

“This certainly involves fighting and exposing prejudice and injustice wherever we encounter it,” the lecture continues, “but we understand that prejudice survives not because it is fixed eternally in human psychology but because capitalism survives to nourish it. We explain to workers and young people how prejudice is cultivated and exploited to undermine class solidarity, and how overcoming those prejudices is not simply morally right but historically necessary.”

The role of the practitioners of racial sectarianism aligned with critical race theory, regardless of their individual motives and intentions, is to obstruct and frustrate that historically necessary process of unification.

This pamphlet is not the last word from Marxists on these issues, but it is hoped that the lecture and essays presented here will contribute to the work of clarifying the difference between Marxism—which is based on a scientific appraisal of objective reality, the experiences of the international workers movement, and the interests and progressive historical potential of the *entire* global working class—and the hopeless dead-end of all political perspectives that attempt to base themselves on race.

Notes:

[1] The *World Socialist Web Site* subjected the 1619 Project, which was launched in 2019, to a swift and comprehensive rebuttal that attracted broad interest. These critical essays and interviews with leading scholars of American history have been published in the volume *The New York Times’ 1619 Project and the Racist Falsification of History*, edited by David North and Thomas Mackaman.

[2] On these subjects, the volume of polemical essays by David North, *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique*, is essential reading.

You can purchase this pamphlet from Mehring Books.



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