

# Navigating Race and Class in Today's Political Climate

by Michael Zweig

Perhaps the most important difficulty in the advancement of progressive politics in the United States is the necessity to navigate the relationships among the justice demands of class on one hand and of race, gender, and ethnic justice on the other. I take it as our shared goal across generations to build a country that treats its workers well and with respect, opposes war, conserves a healthy natural environment, and defeats the many forms of white supremacy and patriarchy that cause suffering among so many scores of millions of people. But as important as action is in moving towards these goals, that action must be guided by understanding based on analysis of the conditions in which our movements operate. Here we will focus on the interactions of class and race.

## Race and Its Consequences

Race is not just a census taker's check-box, or some pollster's focus of interest. Race is an instrument of social control, directed at white working people as well as Blacks. As political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. has put it, "Class—as an expression of location within the political economy—is the framework in which race attains meaning."<sup>1</sup>

Race is not an inherent part of some supposed biological hierarchy. In the United States, race has developed in ways that are deeply enmeshed with society's class dynamics. Race and class are separate and different of course, but neither exists in the US without the other entwined in it. The tensions in this contradiction within US society help drive its path of change.

From the beginning of colonial settlement up to the present time, the mutual determination of race and class has been operating in our country. In our settler state, as in all such societies, Native peoples were the first to be excluded from what Bill Fletcher Jr. has dubbed "the relevant population," as the settlers came to think of themselves. But as early settlements grew throughout the seventeenth century, especially in the all-important colony of Virginia, "white" and "Black" went beyond skin color to take on profound social meaning. By the early part of the eighteenth century the "relevant population" had become white only.

The English began to consolidate systematic racial slavery in the Colonies after Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, a united uprising of African and English bond laborers that had burned Jamestown, Virginia's capital at the time, to the ground. In putting down the rebellion, the English ruling authorities decided to implement the age-old technique of "divide and conquer." As historian Ted Allen has shown, by extending Africans' limited-term bond labor to lifetime slavery, converting them (but not their English counterparts) and their children into outright property with no rights, the rebellious population was divided and turned against itself in the newly constructed guise of white and Black people.<sup>2</sup>

To this day we live with the consequences of this historic exclusion of people of African descent from the "relevant population," a status still invoked to exclude them from being "true Americans." Donald Trump's championing of the false "birther" claim that Barack Obama was born in Africa is one recent example of this, as is the epidemic of police shootings of Black people in communities across the country.

Understanding that racism is an instrument of social control designed to divide workers from one another helps us to understand that racism also harms white workers, in addition to the far greater harm done to African American workers and the Black population in general. The degradation of Black people into slavery did practically nothing to elevate the actual living conditions of white workers, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers. Their conditions appeared to have become better, not absolutely but only in comparison with those of their Black counterparts consigned to chattel slavery. Whites were allowed to keep rights that became prohibited to Black people: the right to own property, to bear arms, to use the court system, and much more. Even so, beginning in slavery days, white small farmers in the South were relegated to marginal land in the hills and mountains, while the wealthy white slaveholders took the most fertile land for themselves.

The only "improvement" white workers gained from white supremacy was what African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois identified as the "psycho- logical wage," his term for the

subjective reward white workers got from the feelings of superiority they found in their higher status compared with Black people, and their apparent common bond with the white elites who ran society. In 1836, John C. Calhoun, the South's principal proponent of states' rights and slavery, explained this forthrightly: "With us, the two great divisions of society are not rich and poor, but white and black; and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class and are respected and treated as equals, if honest and industrious, and hence have a position and pride of character of which neither poverty nor misfortune can deprive them."<sup>3</sup>

With the growth of the US industrial economy in the last half of the nineteenth century, however, the situation regarding white workers grew more complex. The opportunities for economic advancement that opened up in the process accrued almost exclusively to workers of European heritage. These workers experienced real material gains denied to their Black working class counterparts—now freed from their former enslavement—whether in the form of access to credit to start a business, or access to industrial jobs that offered more than they could hope for as a sharecropper or tenant farmer. In factories and mills across the country, whites got the best jobs. Brutal as these working conditions often were, Black workers were channeled into the dirtiest, most dangerous, most unhealthy jobs, or excluded altogether.

In the twentieth century, the reforms of the Depression-era New Deal, although expressed in universal terms, nevertheless benefited white workers far more than Blacks. The Social Security program, for example, was drafted with compromises that excluded household and agricultural workers from its benefits. Senators and congressmen from southern states had demanded these exclusions because over 90% of African American workers held those jobs. The Social Security Act also excluded public sector workers from the program, including teachers, postal workers, and other reasonably stable positions where Black people had been finding relatively better incomes and working conditions. But racist policies that excluded farm workers from New Deal benefits also disadvantaged two-thirds of all US sharecroppers at the time who were white as they, too, were denied those benefits.<sup>4</sup>

The 1935 National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act), without explicit reference to race, protected workers as they organized unions, contributing to their rapid growth in the late 1930s. But, as with Social Security, the Wagner Act excluded agricultural, household, and government workers from protection, effectively leaving almost all Black workers out of the new advantages ruling elites had extended to white workers. The same restrictions continued into the reforms of Second New Deal laws in 1938. Minimum wage legislation and other fair labor standards protections such as the standard forty-hour week, with overtime beyond, once again exempted agricultural, household, and public sector workers.

This racist pattern extended to the GI Bill that followed World War II. The bill was a powerful reform that allowed millions of returning soldiers to get an education, finance new homes, and establish a new high in the standard of living for working class families. But, once again, it was undercut by the compromise with Jim Crow power in the ruling class. Administration of these federal programs was given to state officials, who usually contrived to apply racist restrictions that kept GI Bill benefits away from Black veterans.

This history establishes the material basis of what is sometimes called "white privilege." Historian Ira Katznelson put it another way in the title of his book describing these policies, *When Affirmative Action Was White*.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth-century development of industrial capitalism in the United States, corporate practices and government programs deliberately offered opportunities and advantages to workers of European descent, while at the same time keeping them out of the reach of Native Americans and Americans of African, Asian, and Latin American descent.

But in the long run these advantages come back to undercut the ability of white workers to advance their own position. What they gain in immediate privilege they lose in long-term weakness grounded in a divided working class unable to muster its full strength to push back against the power of capital.<sup>6</sup> In the end, white economic elites have been the only real winners from the imposition of racial slavery, white supremacy, and racism. They have won and maintained their status and power through control over the lives of all working people by keeping them divided.

We can see continuing evidence of the ill effects of racism on white workers in the fact that to this day states in the old slave South, where racism was most virulent and its traditions most valued, tend to have the lowest levels of union membership, education, income, and wealth for white workers as well as Black; as well as the lowest life expectancy and the highest poverty rates for white workers as well as Black workers. Throughout the country, whenever white workers deflect their frustrations and anger onto Black people, the white workers also lose.

It is essential to understand that to say white privilege exists is not to say that all white people are guilty of racist oppression applied to Black people. The privileges are integral and deeply rooted parts of US society and come to white people automatically, without their action or intent. That is why recognizing white skin privilege is neither a condemnation of all white people nor a matter of personal guilt. It is simply a fact of life that, once acknowledged, should act as a spur to determination among white people to dismantle the social structures that perpetuate it.

Just as bond laborers from England did not create racial slavery, white workers did not create white privilege. Such privileges were the creations of white ruling elites, whether slave owners or captains of industry, and their political agents. Once these

patterns were institutionalized and made to seem normal, it was easy to lose track of their origins.

### Structural Racism

Racism is more than the personal opinion of an individual racist whose mind needs to be changed or enlightened. Racism is structural, rooted and reinforced in the operations of social structures that guide us through life. We need to understand how racism and white supremacy are deeply rooted instruments carried forward within institutions that shape people's opinions and life outcomes. We need to challenge those structural channels and their institutional reinforcements.

We see this process in the educational system that still provides significantly fewer and inferior resources to schools with mostly Black students. We see it in "redlining" and other forms of financial discrimination that prevent Black families, farmers, and business owners from getting fair access to credit. We see it in the ways that Black people are systematically segregated in housing markets across the country.<sup>7</sup> We see it in voter suppression measures designed to reduce the political power of Black citizens. Despite gains stemming from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the election of a Black president, we continue to see it in demeaning media representations of Black people in cultural and media institutions, and their relative absence from positions of authority.

A particularly dramatic example of this appeared when viewers of a 2020 Facebook video that featured Black men were offered follow-on options for "more videos about primates." In the same vein, Google's algorithms in 2015 labeled pictures of Black men as gorillas.<sup>8</sup> These openly racist references didn't arise from conscious racism at Facebook and Google. They arose from unconscious and pervasive racism in society, from which the algorithms learn. There is so much racist vitriol on the internet that directly and consciously makes those disgusting connections that an AI algorithm "learns" to pair them automatically and presents it as a natural thing. Far from natural, racism is baked into the cake of US society. Contrary to the old saying that you can't unscramble an egg, and mixing the metaphor, we can unscramble racism from the cake.

The police and vigilante killings of Black people, which have galvanized a new set of protests since the murder of Trayvon Martin, add up to more than a series of individual racist acts. They reflect systemic racism, continuing the shameful history of terror that was a central feature of US race relations following the Civil War. The Economic Justice Institute has documented 4,075 racial lynchings in the US between 1877 and 1950, mostly but by no means exclusively in the old slave states.<sup>9</sup> An average of fifty-six Black people were lynched in each of these seventy-three years. That's more than one person hanged from a tree, burned to death, or thrown into a river to drown in an extrajudicial murder every week for seventy-three years. It is undeniably a horrific legacy of domestic terror inherited by our twenty-first-century

society, deeply embedded in the consciousness of Black people across the country.

Yet we know from history that institutions of white supremacy can be challenged and defeated. The Civil War destroyed slavery. The long legal battle challenging racial segregation ultimately undid the racist legal fantasy of "separate but equal" in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, in law if not in practice. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s put an end to Jim Crow legal segregation, and in a Second Reconstruction it secured federal legal protection for basic civil and voting rights for Black people.

Gains rising from the modern civil rights movement are visible across the country. Substantial numbers of African Americans now pursue careers in law, as doctors, business owners, professors, politicians, and other professional positions far beyond what was possible under Jim Crow. Yet the continuing poverty and racial exclusion faced by millions of African Americans suggests that very different experiences within the Black community over the past fifty years have produced and exposed a greater class divide within it. This brings to mind the words of Angela Davis who said: "The challenge of the 21st century is not to demand equal opportunity in the machinery of oppression, but rather to identify and dismantle those structures in which racism continues to be embedded."<sup>10</sup>

We get a sense of the tenacity with which those structures and white supremacy operate in American society when we consider how every advance against them has called forth a reactionary backlash. Newly designed institutions arose to accomplish the same oppressive purposes. The defeat of slavery and the power of Reconstruction gave way to Black Codes and Jim Crow. The defeat of Jim Crow in the Second Reconstruction in the 1950s and 1960s gave way to mass incarceration, greater racial segregation of neighborhoods and schools, and new forms of voter suppression.

This tenacity is not based on personal preferences or the deranged mental states of wild white supremacists—though they exist and are a serious danger to society. The driving force of reaction is based in the continuing need some people have to find ways to divide working people and weaken their power to limit the power of capital. Who are these people? They are the representatives of capitalist authority, urgent defenders of the basic arrangement of class power in society. They often appeal to "the good old days" when overt racism was acceptable and their class authority was largely unchallenged. They are, for example, the people who support and legislate voter suppression techniques while also doing what they can to suppress union organizing drives, whether in North Carolina or Wisconsin or the many other places where similar toxic politics are at play. White workers have every interest in opposing these racist policies. No progressive working class movement can succeed without confronting this history and fighting to set it right.

## Challenging White Supremacy

The battle against racism must start by acknowledging that white supremacy is first and foremost a problem that white people must address. White supremacy will loosen its grip only when white people loosen it. Black, Hispanic, Native, and Asian social movements will continue to challenge white supremacy, but they cannot end it until white people give it up. How can that happen?

We can get some insight into what might be involved by looking at different motivations that have led a number of white people historically to dedicate their lives to racial equality.<sup>11</sup> Some have been motivated by religious conviction: “We’re all equal as children of God.” Some have been motivated by patriotism: our founding national document proclaims that “all men [people] are created equal,” and the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees equality for all under the law. Others have been motivated politically by an awakened class consciousness that underscores the common interests of all workers.

As powerful as each of these arenas of concern may be in getting white people to move away from white supremacy, each arena also lends itself to opposite interpretations that can reinforce it. Historically, there have been white church leaders who used their interpretations of the Bible to legitimize white supremacy and “explain” the inferiority of Black people. We’ve seen “patriots” waving the flag while in its name upholding states’ rights to strip Black people of the vote. And some interpretations of class dynamics use class analysis to undercut the demands and movements of Black people for equality, claiming they will only divide and weaken the working class.

In other words, each of these arenas—religion, patriotism, class politics—is conflicted in its treatment of white supremacy. Each is an arena in which white people must confront and consciously turn away from white supremacy. But each of these arenas is also conflicted along class lines, as is class analysis itself. As antiracist thinking and action arise among white people, especially in connection with Black movements demanding equality, we soon see backlash reactions mount, stoked and funded by capitalist intervention wherever necessary to reinforce the traditions and habits of mind of white supremacy, often inflamed by right-wing media.

That’s what happened when big-dollar donations flowed to the Trump campaign and presidency as it gave open permission to neo-Nazis and other white supremacists to influence white workers. Movements can bring about the long-term weakening of white supremacy only insofar as they can weaken the grip of capitalist interests, thinking, and values.

As we grapple with this political challenge, it will help to recall James Baldwin’s observation: “I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain.”<sup>12</sup> This tells us why the proper tone and approach of

progressive political education among white workers cannot be a guilt trip. It has to be grounded in a clear explanation of power, a concept workers have no problem appreciating as a critical part of life that they need to understand. Who has the power to inflict the pain that working people experience? Where does the power come from to overcome that infliction? These are questions for political education in movement building.

Here it is essential to keep in mind the crucial fact that white supremacy, historically, is the creation of the ruling class, solidly white from the colonial era on until its very recent inclusion of small numbers of Black and other nonwhite people. White supremacy did not originate in the white sections of the working class. But the history of white supremacy and capitalist dominance are such long-term and “natural” parts of our culture that their origins are invisible to most white people. Every white person has racist images presented to them from their earliest days in our culture, in the media, schools, and everyday life. They don’t ask for them; the images and ideas are thrust upon them. This is not innate.

The frenzied efforts in the early 2020s by state legislatures across the US to banish critical race theory and demonize “wokeness” in schools and universities is an example of this process. Funds from wealthy reactionaries seeking to reinforce the power of capital provide openings for local mobilizations by right-wing people raising their voices in elections from local school boards to members of Congress and the presidency.

It will take effort among white people to make these forces visible and see how these conflicts manifest aspects of class dynamics. It will take dedicated education to get white people to unlearn the automatic and internalized apparent naturalness of white supremacy. This process must include personal engagement of some white people with others searching together for the roots of their attitudes about race. The unlearning process needs also to involve an educational program that includes the history of white supremacy as an instrument of social control, including control of white workers. It must also convey a solid understanding of capitalist class structure and dynamics.

Inducing guilt is not the point or the goal. On the contrary, it is to clarify the ways in which racist messages came to be inscribed in white people, the better to release their influence. Success in this process will be more likely if the education is part of navigating concrete real-life struggles in which the questions have arisen. Real-life experience is where “aha moments” are most likely to occur.

An example of this process comes from Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), an organization working to mobilize white working class people across the South. Beth Howard, a SURJ leader, explained how white working class rural voters in Georgia came into the 2020 electoral campaign to support the Black senatorial candidate Raphael Warnock, the Jewish senatorial

candidate Jon Ossoff, and Joe Biden against Donald Trump: “What we really try to do is organize around mutual interests, talking to our folks about what white people have to gain from breaking with white solidarity and joining a multiracial movement. ... We do that by creating the kind of welcoming space that is centered in working class community.

“We have really embraced bold, progressive reforms and candidates, including candidates of color, because we really believe that poor and working-class white people will turn out and vote for candidates who will bring meaningful, progressive change. We embrace talking explicitly about race ... because they [the right] talk about race all the time.<sup>13</sup>

Howard’s experience in Georgia contradicts the stereotype that white working class people were inevitably central to Trump’s base. “The most angry, volatile Trump-supporting people I talked to were white people with money, mostly white men with money. ... I think we need to not continue to scapegoat poor white people and count them out. They are bearing the brunt of these harmful policies and we are taking that fury and that righteous anger and directing it where it belongs, not at other poor and working class people, Black and Brown people, Indigenous people, people of color.” Looking beyond any single election cycle, Howard stresses the need for a “strong, deep bench of poor and working-class anti-racist white organizers,” calling for a “long-haul investment ... [for] deeper work in more conservative parts of our states.”<sup>14</sup>

Clear and straightforward discussions about the intersections of class with race are best undertaken in the course of organizing campaigns for economic and social justice. This is the context in which people of European descent can give up an identity as “white,” setting that social category aside as they come to understand how capitalist interests shape its content to their disadvantage.

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## NOTES

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- 14 Burnham, “Change a State,” 13-32.