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A Left Critique of Class Reductionism

Abstract

An overview of three recent books examining the politics of class and race provide lessons about how to avoid a “class reductionist” politics that interferes with building a multiracial and inclusionary working class movement.

Keywords

Identity Politics, Class Reductionism, Solidarity

The Black Lives Matter movement has sustained demonstrations on a scale, duration and intensity that is rarely seen among social justice movements in the United States. In just a few months, this movement has raised social consciousness about how systemic racism is deeply embedded in the fabric of U.S. institutions, manifested in police brutality disproportionately targeted at African Americans. At the grassroots level, multiracial coalitions have participated in demonstrations as part of a broader political program. Most notably, local organizations linked to Black Lives Matter have advocated a redistribution of resources away from policing and toward assistance for housing, health and welfare services, and community support networks that can provide alternatives to the prison-industrial complex.¹

A majority of Americans have expressed support for many of the goals and objectives of the Black Lives Matter movement.² This represents an astonishing level of consciousness raising that has been building for some time. This is due in large part to the work of community activists in laying the political infrastructure that enabled the massive expansion of protests that we have seen within the past year. These protests have been immediate responses to several high-profile police assassinations of African Americans, which have been recorded and disseminated via social media that has given added urgency to the political demands of the protest movement. Likewise, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s galvanized a broader political support network with video footage of white supremacists clubbing, jailing and killing African-Americans and their supporters in the Jim Crow South and the urban North. In keeping with this tradition, the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement has targeted the police and the prison-industrial complex by effective utilization of social media, drawing the largest multiracial crowds in defense of black lives than we have ever seen in the U.S.

The socialist left has been part of the Black Lives Matter movement, though there are disagreements within the socialist tradition of how to orient the politics of multiracial working class solidarity with the demands of the racial justice movement. With this in mind, there have been several recent books that address the politics of race and class in the context of building working class movements for social justice. Each of these works argues that successful working class movements, capable of challenging and contesting capitalist power, require an integration of race and class that cannot sidestep one without discussing the other. Erik Loomis, in his impressive history of U.S. labor struggles, *A History of America in Ten Strikes*, captures over two hundred years of working class struggle in the U.S. through the barriers of class and racial divisions. At the founding of the U.S., white male property owners emerged as the dominant class within a political and economic system whose very existence was predicated on slavery. This U.S. slaveocracy is not simply a relic of the distant past. Capitalists have routinely utilized institutional racist power structures as a weapon against working class solidarity.

A Marxist framing of the interests of the working class under capitalism can either assist workers in building multiracial working class solidarity or hinder such efforts, depending on how Marxist categories are deployed. Some socialists claim that there is no such thing as “class reductionism,” because universal class demands incorporate the diverse identities of workers as a unified class, whose interests coalesce as a result of the exploitative structures inherent to

¹ Sam Levin, “Movement to Defund Police Gains Unprecedented Support Across U.S.,” *The Guardian*, June 4, 2020.

² Adam Sewer, “The New Reconstruction,” *The Atlantic*, October 2020.

capitalism. In this perspective, advanced most notably by political scientist Adolph Reed, universal working class demands avoid the “identity reductionism” that capitalist elites often use to divide workers by essentializing their racial, ethnic and gender identities in a way that impedes working class unity.³ In this formulation, universal demands that prioritize class interests have a better chance of being successful in mobilizing the working class than do demands connected to various racial, ethnic and gender identities. This Marxist framing of working class interests is in keeping with the Marxian definition of “class-in-itself”, where capitalist owners profit from the exploitation of workers as a class which produces the surplus value that capitalism depends on for its very survival.

This Marxist framework has the advantage of being straightforward in identifying the mechanisms of exploitation. However, it is less helpful in grappling with the broader political economy of capitalist systems, which are based on historical legacies of exploitation that in practice fragment workers, societies and countries into different configurations of oppressed identities that go beyond static categories of class. Therefore, we need a Marxist analysis that is complex enough to understand that capitalist systems embody the intersection of class exploitation with racial, ethnic and gender oppressions that are not simply bourgeois impediments to universal working class solidarity.

Capitalist owners have used racial, ethnic, and gender divisions to obstruct working class unity. These divisions create lasting structures of oppression, which contribute to important divisions within the working class that Marx and Engels understood within their materialist framework. Instead of simply reifying “class” as a fixed category that could be universalized to promote successful revolutionary movements against capitalism, the original Marxists examined how capitalist power structures are kept intact by both exploitation and oppression. The concept of exploitation identified the extracting of surplus value in production, which defined the working class as central to the capitalist system and thereby central to challenging that system. The concept of oppression identified how racist, sexist and xenophobic structures are part of the very fabric of capitalism, helping to enable capitalist ideologies to take root within the working classes themselves.⁴

A Marxism that is grounded in a complex understanding of the interplay between exploitation and oppression is centrally important in helping to build a multiracial working class opposition to capitalism. That means, in the context of Black Lives Matter, understanding, acknowledging and appreciating the breadth and scope of oppression faced by African-Americans under U.S. capitalism. The history of U.S. labor struggles has been deeply affected by the capitalist-driven structures of institutional racism. These legacies of oppression have divided the working class and have presented obstacles to working class unity. The oppression of black workers has also been deeply entrenched within lasting material structures of segregation, second-class citizenship and disenfranchisement, substandard housing, wages and living conditions, institutional discrimination in employment and high levels of poverty. The segmenting of black and white workers has also been used by capitalists to divide native-born workers from immigrant workers, which further reinforces generations of segmentation among U.S. workers that are reflected in differentiated conditions of employment and unemployment. The key to building multiracial

³ Adolph Reed, “The Myth of Class Reductionism,” *The New Republic*, September 25, 2019.

⁴ David Fields, “Marxism and the Race Problem,” *Radical Political Economy*, January 2019.

working class unity is to acknowledge these divisions and to fight for the interests of oppressed groups as part of the struggle to build a unified working class movement.

The fight for the interests of the most oppressed members of the working class, whose identity is often defined by the precarity of their existence under U.S. and global capitalism, is essential in building a large-scale, multiracial working class movement. As Loomis describes in his book, the U.S. labor movement made its biggest advances when the movement expanded its ranks away from decades of craft unionism dominated by the American Federation of Labor, which devoted its resources in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to protecting the narrow interests of white skilled craft workers. The formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1935 represented a fundamental challenge to the narrow, racist and exclusionary politics of the AFL. Pushed to the left by communist and socialist parties during the depression of the 1930s, workers wielded wildcat strikes to assert their power in non-union plants.

The emergence of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) facilitated the largest sustained growth of working class organization in the history of the country. The mobilization of millions of workers was a product of workers own collective efforts to strike even when those strikes were illegal and when no union existed to represent their interests. The creation of the CIO provided an organizing platform for unskilled and minority workers which previously did not exist until the conditions of the 1930s expedited a surge in strike and organizing activity. The gains of the U.S. labor movement were reinforced by the circumstances of World War II, when the U.S. state aggressively intervened in the capitalist market to ensure the adequate production of manufactured goods necessary to meet the demands of the war.

As union strikes reached their highest levels in the U.S. in 1946, a combination of a capitalist counteroffensive and the purging of radicals from the labor movement led to a watered-down union movement dominated by the politics of “business unionism.” This meant that union officials at the top of the AFL and CIO (eventually merged in 1955) would lead a union movement which would restrict its bargaining to wages and working conditions, as opposed to advocating for greater worker decision-making in production. Historically, it had always been the left-wing of the labor movement, including maverick anarcho-syndicalist organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World, alongside socialists and communists, who pushed for worker democracy in production decisions. The McCarthy period, combined with the conservatism of union bureaucrats, contributed to a streamlining of worker demands and a purging of “radicals” within the union movement. These trends reinforced a long-term bureaucratization of union leadership, which gradually became more disconnected from the needs, interests and demands of rank-and-file workers.

This became especially apparent in the strike waves of the 1960s, where young workers at manufacturing plants found themselves confronting their capitalist bosses and their union officials. This was evident when young workers used work stoppages and strikes at manufacturing plants such as the GM plant in Lordstown, Ohio, to rebel against speed-up orders by plant managers which posed safety and health risks to employees and further stripped them of any control over production decisions. The United Auto Workers (UAW) leadership eventually supported workers strikes at the Lordstown plant, but the UAW leadership conspired with management to limit the gains that workers were given after the strike reached its conclusion. As

with previous contracts, GM would give no concessions to workers advocating for worker input in decision-making.

As Loomis explains, the fissures between rank and file workers and their union leadership also intersected with race and gender representation and inclusion within the union. During the 1960s, just as UAW President Walter Reuther spoke at the March on Washington for Jobs and Justice in 1963, which combined appeals for both economic and racial justice, his union continued to discriminate against African-American workers, alongside other discriminatory policies practiced by the U.S. Steelworkers of America and the building trades, whose quotas kept African-American workers from securing union membership. The struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, when rank and file workers struck for higher pay, better working conditions and more say on the job, intersected with struggles against their own privileged union bureaucrats as well as racism from significant numbers of white workers. Union leaders played to this racism, which reinforced the politics of a narrow business unionism that would foster collaboration between the AFL-CIO and imperialist U.S. foreign policies, including support for the Vietnam War by AFL-CIO President George Meany. Despite Meany's endorsement of the war, the anti-war opposition was in fact led by young workers from diverse racial backgrounds who were able to pass anti-war resolutions in AFL-CIO locals despite their leadership's support for the war. Far from being an "identity distraction," the uptick in working class political activity during the 1960s and early 1970s represented a labor challenge to the leadership by those who had been most excluded from union decision-making: young people, African-Americans, immigrants, and women, who had to struggle to get their voices heard but whose radicalization represented an effort to make unions democratically accountable to their members.

These efforts of course collided against the corporate pushback against union victories that was enabled by the rise in corporate political activism during the 1970s, a prelude to ongoing economic restructuring, deindustrialization and weakening of union contracts and membership amidst increasingly corporate-friendly government policies. The Republican Party steered far to the right under Reagan, with the important symbolic defeat of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers strike in 1981, despite the union representing very conservative social politics epitomized by their decision, alongside the Teamsters, to have endorsed Reagan's Presidential bid. PATCO was notorious for racism, sexism and an exclusionary sensibility that in the end contributed to its lack of support from other unions. The ability of the Reagan Administration to defeat the PATCO workers occurred in the context of full-scale corporate political mobilization behind these efforts. This defeat was also enabled by the severe limitations of business unionism, which had weakened the ability of workers to fight back, and the changing structures of global capitalism, which added new pressures to working class political organizing.

The response of the Democratic Party's political leadership to the crisis of organized labor was to try to maintain the appearance of Party support for unions, while simultaneously supporting federal and state policies which weakened the position of U.S. workers. According to historian Dave Roediger, in his new book, *The Shrinking Middle Class*, an important aspect of this Democratic strategy was to rely on research undertaken by prominent Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg to develop a politics that would be effective in appealing to a narrow section of the working class, specifically white workers who had long ago fled the cities for the suburbs, and in Greenberg's framing were indistinguishable from white collar professionals, especially in

their understanding of racial and identity politics. Greenberg's research emerged as compatible with the corporate-funded Democratic Leadership Council, which helped lead the move of the Democratic Party in a business-friendly direction. This meant that the DLC would be interested in Greenberg's findings as a way to appeal to white male workers on the basis of their "white identity," which meant that broader class appeals that could have examined the commonality of white male workers with African-American workers and with women, were considered less politically effective.

From Greenberg's framing, white workers, specifically those from McComb county, Michigan, where Greenberg did his most extensive survey research, did not think of themselves as workers at all, but as "middle class," which would be the standard way that Greenberg and the Democratic Party establishment would try to appeal to their interests. Greenberg's formulation of sections of the "white working class" as "middle class," was not entirely due to elite machinations. It was also due to polling that highlighted how whites racialized their identities within the ideological frames of "law and order," "limited taxation," and a preference for politicians who addressed their concerns as individuals within the context of a suburban setting, dominated by concerns with property values and stability. This framing avoided the other possible frames of these workers, such as examining what these workers may have in common with minority workers or women. Identity politics, in this formulation, meant a rejection of multiracial and gender framing in favor of a more exclusionary and pro-business framing of a segment of "white workers" as "middle class," more likely to vote, and more receptive to fiscal policies of moderation and social policies that eschewed talk of racial and gender equity.

Roediger's insights about how the Democratic Party elites maneuvered to typecast segments of white working class voters as "conservative middle class suburban dwellers" fits comfortably with the right-wing shift of the Party from the Reagan years to the present. This use of "identity politics," however, is distinct from the notion that the Democratic Party catered to the identity interests of minority groups, which is the view advanced by several liberal commentators, including Mark Lilla.⁵ Quite the contrary, the corporate-friendly politics of the Democratic Party framed working class interests quite narrowly, which helped to eradicate an inclusionary working class politics that would serve to unite the interests of white workers with the most oppressed minority workers, trapped in the worst jobs, the worst poverty and segregated by decades of discriminatory policies in work that paid the least but required the most hours. Though all U.S. workers saw their incomes and wages stagnate for over four decades, the Democratic Party establishment has used the framing of "middle class" to refer disproportionately to a small category of white workers who were older, who had moved to the suburbs, and who, it was argued by Greenberg and party insiders, would be resistant to any linkage of their class position to questions of racial and gender equality. The primary concern of the corporate Democratic Party insiders was to prevent these workers from defecting to Reagan in the 1980s (some did) or to be part of a wave of white "middle class" voters who would be unreliable Democrats from 1992 to the present.

The corporate politics of the Democratic leadership contributed to the ideological fracturing working class interests by focusing on the perceived interests of the "white working class" by

⁵ Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, Harper 2017. For a good critique of Lilla, see Samuel Moyn, "Mark Lilla and the Crisis of Liberalism," *Boston Review*, Feb. 27, 2018.

redefining this class as a subset of “middle class” interest and values. This was most evident in the DLC right turn of the Democratic Party under Bill Clinton, which embraced deficit reduction, support for mass incarceration targeted disproportionately at African Americans in the inner cities, reduction of the social safety net which hurt all workers but especially the most oppressed sections of the working class with the least incomes and the most precarity, and corporate friendly policies such as NAFTA and the deregulation of finance. With this as a backdrop, the new book by Ian Haney Lopez, *Merge Left*, addresses the issue of how the fracturing of class and race through the narrow prism of “white identity” has eroded the ability of U.S. workers to unite as a universal working class.

Lopez argues that the pervasiveness of “dog whistle politics” has been an enduring political feature of U.S. politics for decades. “Dog whistle politics” are racist appeals to white voters for the purpose of scapegoating minority populations, especially African Americans, as a way to increase white voter turnout for a candidate. Southern Democrats had long engaged in “dog whistle” politics in attempts to discredit civil rights legislation and labor legislation, including any effort to expand labor rights and protections to farmworkers in the South. Of course, these fault lines of race and class are hardly confined to this split within the Democratic Party. The effectiveness of “dog whistle politics,” as Lopez argues, was also dependent on a much wider structural and institutional racism that had long been pervasive in U.S. economic, social and political structures. This included the history of racism within business unions, documented by Loomis, the pattern of housing segregation and redlining encouraged by federal home mortgage loans, the economic discrimination evident in the often two-tiered job market, and white flight away from inner cities which was strategically identified by Stanley Greenburg as a political opportunity that could be effectively managed by the Democratic Party. And, of course, “dog whistle politics” was elevated to Republican political strategy during the Nixon era as a way to drive Southern working class Democrats out of the Democratic Party and into the Republican Party. The architects of such an approach, including Kevin Phillips (1970s) and later Lee Atwater (1980s), were intent on combining racist appeals with opposition to an expansion of government social services to working class people. Lee Atwater summarized this approach in a recording from 1981:

“You start out in 1954 by saying, ‘Nigger, nigger, nigger.’ By 1968 you can’t say ‘nigger’—that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states’ rights, and all that stuff, and you’re getting so abstract. Now, you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all of the things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites... ‘We want to cut this’ is much more abstract than even the busing things, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than ‘Nigger, nigger.’....Anyway you look at it, race is going to be on the back burner.”⁶

Atwater’s quote is a very concise elaboration of “dog whistle politics,” including strategy and intent. In his book, Lopez uses evidence from public opinion research and campaign outcomes to examine the factors that are likely to make “dog whistle politics” more effective. Lopez argues that the majority of U.S. white voters hold a wide range of conflicting ideas in their heads, some racist ideas and some progressive, inclusionary ideas. Political campaigns that are most effective

⁶ N.D.B. Connolly, “To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism and Justice,” *Boston Review*, February 21, 2018.

in using “dog whistle politics” are those that go unchallenged. Ignoring the race and class dynamic dramatically increases the chances that white voters are more likely to be mobilized by racist appeals. Lopez uses compelling examples drawn from decades of political campaigning to support this point, which are complemented by extensive public opinion and psychological research.

The cases where Democratic political campaigns have attempted to challenge “dog whistle politics” include appeals to universal class interests. This is when Democratic politicians urge voters to go beyond their resentments for the sake of uniting around common interests, especially as working class constituents. This method of counterposing economic populism to “dog whistle politics” is “somewhat effective,” according to Lopez, but falls short in diluting the power of “dog whistle politics.” The best counterattack, according to Lopez’ research, is to openly confront the use of racism as a tactic to divide voters. This involves calling out the racist attacks and locating them in a broader context of attacks on all workers. Rather than say nothing about the racist attacks, or to attempt to deflate them with an opposing line of “economic populism,” this counterstrategy identifies racism as a specific scapegoating strategy that seeks to divide the most vulnerable.

Of course, the necessity of integrating race and class goes well beyond political campaigns, which are often captured by corporations due in part to the sheer expense required to mount an effective campaign. More importantly, the integration of race and class is an essential part of “left” political strategy. This is made more urgent by the deeply systemic dividing lines between citizens who have been taught to elevate their “white identity” and those who suffer fundamental oppression within capitalism. Integrating race and class is essential to building an effective working class resistance to capitalism and to the corporate capture of the political system. Universal economic appeals that minimize race, or that assume that oppressed groups will automatically benefit from left populist programs, do not do enough to directly confront longstanding patterns of segregation, separation and suspicion, and distrust among workers whose identities have been elevated by reactionary political discourse. Public relations consultants working on behalf of both Republican and Democratic campaigns have encouraged narrow expressions of identity as part of corporate political strategies. This includes the Republican Party’s use of racial scapegoating to wage war on labor unions, social welfare spending, and taxation and regulation of corporations. This also includes the Democratic Party’s elevation of the white working class, whose “middle class” attributes are deliberately steered in a reactionary direction based on skewed PR tricks that work to the advantage of corporate donors to the party.

These books should be a lesson to sections of the U.S. left that view “identity politics” as a politics that elevates categories of oppressed groups ahead of the broader interests of the working class. In fact, the actual use of identity politics by corporate Democratic Party PR consultants has often been in the opposite direction: to negate the interests of the most oppressed sections of the working class, whose views, opinions and material circumstances mean that they do not matter to these consultants. In contrast, for the left, the fight against all forms of oppression should be viewed as essential for building an inclusionary and multiracial working class movement capable of taking power in the U.S.