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USA

# **Black Nationalism, Black Solidarity**

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**In the previous issue of *Against the Current* I discussed the ideology of white nationalism and white supremacy. The contrasting ideology of Black nationalism must be understood in the framework of the Marxist analysis of nationalism of oppressed peoples.**

Blacks would be happy to drop the hyphenated “African-American” and redefine the term “American” as meaning all of its peoples. Most whites, however, don’t support that change if it means seriously coming to grips with the legacy of slavery, genocide and persistent racism.

Even more than 150 years after the Civil War, Confederate monuments still occupy prime property in southern states. “American” and “white,” to many, are implicitly equivalent with no hyphen required.

Black “identity politics” is a phrase not commonly used by African Americans. It’s a reaction to racism and historical discrimination and oppression, whereas white identity politics is a choice. The terms “white nationalism” and “white supremacy” are interchangeable.

As with previous slogans such as Black Pride or Black Power, the demand Black Lives Matter is one of defiance to police violence. Whenever whites assert their “rights” as Donald Trump did in 2016, African Americans must push back and resist. The power of Black solidarity and nationalism is to strengthen Black unity, and sets an example for others to stand up against the ideology of white victimhood.

The fundamental contrast between Black nationalism and defiance versus white nationalism is important. The former has a positive dynamic; the latter is reactionary.

## When Race” Trumps” Class

What Blacks are most concerned about with Trump is his large personal base, who see him as infallible and follow him no matter his flip-flops on issues or his racist rants. That base, including his white working class supporters, see Black defiance as a threat to their leader and themselves.

Although they suffer as all workers do from income inequality and the shift of more wealth to billionaires, they see themselves as victims of immigration and government programs that help Black and Brown people. Trump stokes the worse racial instincts of this base. Race trumps class.

The cult-like worship of Trump is why his working-class supporters continue to back the Republican Party with its Wall Street policies. They believe Trump and his constant lies, even when the facts say otherwise. It is a deep emotional connection.

That mob-like thinking is dangerous for Blacks, Latinos and Muslims. It is how extralegal racist and fascist type organizations are created and used by demagogues.

Trump is conscious of his actions. He manipulates his cult-like white base to get what he wants. The GOP leaders

work with Trump because of his base and so long as he signs bills and executive orders that carry out the GOP agenda.

He's appointed far right operatives or billionaires to every Cabinet position. The Attorney General is leading the openly anti-Black campaign. For African Americans it means the continuation of decades of discrimination and violence.

The Justice Department led by Jefferson Sessions has been transformed into a whites-first organization. The Civil Rights division is being turned into a pro-cop and "colorblind" agency. There are no Blacks in senior positions, whereas for eight years under Obama the Attorney General was African American.

## FBI's New Anti-Black Campaign

The FBI released a report on August 7, 2017 that came to light in a Congressional hearing in late November with Attorney General Sessions. The report is titled "[Black Identity Extremists Likely Motivated to Target Law Enforcement Officers.](#)"

In his article "The Trump Administration and Hoover-Era Paranoia" in the December 4th The New Yorker, Jelani Cobbs, a staff writer and professor of journalism at Columbia University, writes:

"The report, which was issued in August and leaked to ForeignPolicy.com last month, argues that the increased scrutiny of police shootings of African-Americans in recent years may result in acts of violence directed at law enforcement. It cites a 2014 incident, in which a man attacked four N.Y.P.D. officers with a hatchet, and a 2016 attack on police in Baton Rouge that left three officers dead. But the primary example is the shooting during an anti-police-brutality rally in Dallas last year, when Micah Xavier Johnson, a twenty-five-year-old Army veteran who harbored resentment toward whites, in general, and toward white law-enforcement officials killed five policemen and wounded seven more, before he himself was killed.

"In discussing such incidents, the report coins the category "black-identity extremist," which is poorly defined but features the three-word rhythm of other usefully ambiguous terms, such as "radical Islamic terrorist." The authors argue that people sympathetic to the Sovereign Citizens movement and to the Moorish Science Temple of America, both of which reject the authority of the federal government, warrant vigilance, even though violence conducted by any such sympathizers "has been rare over the past twenty years." To ground their conclusions in history, the authors point to radical organizations of the nineteen-seventies, such as the Black Liberation Army, which has been defunct for longer than Johnson had been alive, and for which they offer scant connection to the B.I.E. cause.

"When Representative Karen Bass, of California, asked Sessions about the report, he said that he had not yet read it but he nonetheless stood by its findings. When she pressed him to cite an organization committed to the kind of violence the report warns of, he said, "There are groups that do have an extraordinary commitment to their racial identity and some have transformed themselves even into violent activists," but declined to name any.

"The black-identity extremist appears to be something of a bureaucratic phantom, yet that kind can be the most difficult to exorcise. The "Final Report on Negro Subversion" prefaced a long engagement between the F.B.I. and organizations seeking to realize black rights, which included the surveillance of Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as the Bureau's COINTELPRO efforts to destroy the Black Panther Party. When James Comey was the Bureau's director, he kept on his desk a copy of the approval of Hoover's request to wiretap King, as a reminder of the perils of

organizational excess.”

Since the end of the Civil War and the defeat of Reconstruction, the government has systematically targeted Black leaders and militants as “subversives,” “communists” and “extremists” while white terrorists who lynched and murder Blacks were often not investigated.

As Cobb notes, the anti-Black actions and policies of government agencies have a long record that continues to this day.

## The National Question Theory

The theory behind the “national question,” as Marxists call it, explains national oppression and its progressive dynamics. It is rooted in the basic understanding not only of how capitalism causes class struggle, but also how racism (and previously colonialism) are integral to the ruling class and the economic workings of the system.

Black nationalism, as a nationalism of the oppressed, is powerful. The racial/national oppression of both free Blacks and slaves led Blacks to stand as a people wherever their lives were threatened. The tactics and methods of self-defense and protection were calibrated to the situation. Racial solidarity has been and is inspiring to the Black communities and others.

African Americans have few illusions about racism and national oppression even if they may not use these words to describe Black solidarity. Blacks who have tried to pretend that racism doesn't impact them because of individual merit quickly learn otherwise. No African American can hide from racist assumptions of whites. Whites don't know anything about who you are. They just see you're Black, with all that means to them.

The central reason why the U.S. working class has had a hard time to organizing itself politically and fighting for power is tied to the ruling class ability to use racism, keeping white workers from joining with African Americans on a sustained basis.

In the mid-1800s when Marx wrote *Capital* and previously the *Communist Manifesto*, he and Friedrich Engels saw capitalism as entering its final stages. Marx noted that the fall of capitalism, the victory of socialism and eventually communism would not be easy. The capitalist system on the political level had weapons to use to divide the working class and its allies.

Socialists at the time assumed that colonialism and national oppression would be settled by the class struggle to overthrow the capitalist rulers. But in the imperialist epoch, socialists could no longer view class struggle separately from the rights of colonial peoples and those racially oppressed.

Leon Trotsky's writings in the 1930s on the Black struggle in the United States remain incisive. He explained why the right of self-determination and freedom applied to Black people. In his discussion with leaders of the Socialist Workers Party he said:

“The Negroes are a race and not a nation: “Nations grow out of the racial material under definite conditions ....

“We do, of course, not obligate the Negroes to become a nation; if they are, then that is a question of their

consciousness, that is, what they desire and what they strive for. We say: If the Negroes want that then we must fight against imperialism to the last drop of blood, so that they gain the right, wherever and how they please, to separate a piece of land for themselves.

“The fact that they are today not a majority in any state does not matter. It is not a question of the authority of the states but of the Negroes. That in the overwhelming Negro territory also whites have existed and will remain henceforth is not the question and we do not need today to break our heads over a possibility that sometime the whites will be suppressed by the Negroes. In any case the suppression of the Negroes pushes them toward a political and national unity.” (See [here](#))

That impulse for unity was the primary reason behind Black support for Obama, more than his views or actions. (Clarence Thomas, a conservative Supreme Court justice, also had majority support from African Americans.)

Voting Black is the lowest form of political consciousness. In 2016 without Obama on the ballot the Black vote went down, and not just because of voter suppression.

The higher form of consciousness arising from popular struggle is a conscious push for radical changes through creating independent (from the two-party system) political organizations. That impetus does not exist — yet.

Although Marx wrote over 170 years ago that capitalism was a destructive system for working people, and Lenin and Trotsky discussed the rights of oppressed peoples, none of these issues have been resolved. Their analysis remains relevant today. Capitalism cannot end racism and bring equality.

## Malcolm X and Freedom Now

One hundred years after the rise of Jim Crow segregation, following the defeat of Reconstruction, Malcolm X said the United States did not represent Black people. While still a leader of the Nation of Islam, he said:

“Sir, how can and Negro say America is his nation? He was brought here in chains; he was put in slavery and worked like a mule for three hundred years; he was separated from his land, his culture, his God, his language!

“The Negro was taught to speak the white man’s tongue, worship the white God, and accept the white man as his superior.

“This is a white man’s country. And the Negro is nothing but an ex-slave who is now trying to get himself integrated into the slave master’s house.

“And the slave master doesn’t want you! You fought and bled and died in every war the white man waged, and he still won’t give you justice. You nursed his baby and cleaned behind his wife, and he still won’t give you freedom; you turned the other cheek while he lynched you and raped your women, but he still won’t give you equality.” (1963)

African American writers such as Ta-Nehisi Coates [\[2\]](#) reflect the realism of average working-class Black Americans. Realism is not pessimism. Like most Blacks, Coates offers no solution to institutional racism.

## Black Nationalism, Black Solidarity

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The nationalism (ethnic solidarity) of oppressed peoples can have a progressive and revolutionary dynamic. Coates himself has radicalized by studying history and the rise of the Movement for Black Lives and actions of Black athletes against police violence. The #MeToo against sexual harassment and assault was first started by African American women ten years ago and is massive today.

The fight for full freedom remains a central one in politics. It can move forward, then be pushed back. Victory requires a state where racial discrimination is not tolerated. (The one country that outlawed institutional racism and used positive action was Cuba under Fidel Castro.)

It is important to study great African American activists and leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, W.E.B. DuBois, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X – but also the Marxist tradition including Marx and Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and C.L.R. James. The fundamental conflicts of race have evolved. There has been some progress, then reversals. The objective remains what it has always been – Freedom Now through struggle.

### [Against the Current](#)

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[1] <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/n...>

[2] Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates is an American author, journalist, comic book writer, and educator. Coates is a national correspondent for The Atlantic, where he writes about cultural, social and political issues, particularly regarding African Americans – Ed