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Racism

Marxism and the race problem

- Features -

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Marxism has had a difficult relationship with non-class oppressions like gender and race. For most, historical materialism is “race” and “gender-blind,” providing an explanation of only class exploitation. Those working in our tradition have either reduced race or gender to capitalist manipulation or adopted an intersectional approach in which class, race and gender are separate but intersecting systems of oppression.

Class reductionists often confuse the historical preconditions for the emergence of capitalism with the necessary effects of its reproduction, leading them to be incapable of explaining the persistence of racial and gender inequality among working people. Intersectional approaches are unable to explain the origins of different systems of oppression, which seems to spring from either an unspecified set of “privileges,” from ill will and bad ideas, or from a “functional” relationship of capital to racial and gender oppression.

Both approaches are based on a simplistic understanding of Marxism. As Lise Vogel argued in her path-breaking, but long ignored book, *Marxism and Women’s Oppression: Toward a Unified Theory*, capitalist accumulation presupposes the production and reproduction of the “special-commodity” labor-power. She located the roots of gender oppression in the organization of the reproduction of labor-power in private household/families under capitalism.

Similarly, race can be explained as an unintended consequence of the reproduction of capitalist social relations. [1] Howard Botwinick has demonstrated that capitalist accumulation and competition constantly *differentiate* conditions of work, wage rates and profits rates—creating the matrix for the production and reproduction of racial oppression. [2]

Accumulation, driven by the mechanization of production, constantly reproduces a reserve army of labor and the possibility of labor-intensive, low wage industries. Competition, again fought with what Marx called the “heavy artillery” of fixed capital, also produces heterogeneous production processes within industries, as capital’s with older techniques that cannot be abandoned immediately struggle to remain competitive by paying lower wages and intensifying the labor-process.

The constant differentiation of working conditions, wage rates and profits within and between branches of production, poses challenges to both capital and labor. On the one hand, capitalists are faced with a mass of workers, nearly all of whom (with an eighth-grade level of reading, writing and math) can do most tasks. Capitalists spontaneously assign “characteristics” to differentiate workers and help them structure the employment queue.

On the other hand, workers, especially when unions and other “class-against-class” organizations are weak, face one another as competing sellers of their labor-power. Workers contend for jobs that have different levels of stability, wages, working conditions; allowing different opportunities for housing, education and health care. Workers also spontaneously invent “characteristics” which will allow them to present themselves to capitalists as more “reliable” workers than others.

The contradictory experience of capitalist social relations makes race—the ideological notion that humanity is divided into distinct groups with unchangeable characteristics—the logical way for capital and labor to spontaneously organize competition on the labor-market. On the one hand, exploitation under capitalism takes place through the “equal exchange” of commodities—the sale of labor-power to capitalists as its “value.” While disguising the reality of exploitation, the buying and selling of labor-power promotes the notion of equality of all human beings.

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On the other, the reality of accumulation and competition constantly produces inequalities between capital and labor, and within the working class. If all humans are supposed to be equal, inequality can only be explained by reference to unchangeable characteristics that make some groups inherently superior, others inherently inferiorâ€”to race.

Contrary to the claims of Cedric Robinson and others, racism is not a trans-historical phenomena. [3] In pre-capitalist societies, humans differentiated one another by categories like religion (“heathens and believers”) and kinship-community (“strangers and neighbors/kin”). Both tended to be highly *flexible and changeable* through conversion, adoption, and the like.

There was no need for the notion of race in pre-capitalist societies because inequality was inscribed, legally and juridically, in class relations and *assumed* to be the natural condition of humanity. Only with capitalism, and its assumption of humane quality, does actual inequality have to be explained by the notion of race.

A form of proto-racism emerges in the Iberian Peninsula before the emergence of capitalism. In the late fourteenth and early fifteen centuries, absolutist monarchies in Castile and Aragon, fearing that converted Jews and Muslims secretly maintained their religious rituals, defined only Christians of “pure blood” eligible for venal offices.

It is only with the emergence of African slavery in late seventeenth century Virginia that race is crystallized. While slavery had existed for millennia, it was one of numerous forms of unfree labor (serfdom, servitude, etc.), and did not require any special explanation. In the wake of Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676, indentured servitude and other forms of unfree labor disappear in Virginia, leaving only people of African descent unfree by the early eighteenth century. Here, for the first time, freedom and equality appeared to be the “natural” condition of humansâ€”requiring a notion of intrinsic and permanent difference to explain why many of African peoples remained unfree.

Race and racism did not disappear with the abolition of New World slavery in the nineteenth century, but instead became *generalized* across the capitalist world. The specific terms of racist ideology, what specific characteristics made some groups superior and other inferior, evolved with changing class relations and differentiation. While racialized slaves were viewed as ungrateful, untrustworthy and half-witted, racialized wage workers became undisciplined, irregular and refractory employees. In the colonial world, the supposed “inability” of native peoples to “improve” agriculture justified the appropriation of land and resources by the colonists.

In the US today, competition among workers produces systematic racial disparities among workers. Workers of color are constantly over-represented in the reserve army of labor, consistently experiencing higher rates of unemployment, underemployment and poverty than whites. African-Americans and Latinos are also over-represented in labor-intensive, low-wage sectors of the economy such as home health care, nursing care, meat processing, warehousing, textiles and retail.

Rooting race in the reproduction of capitalism allows us to understand that multi-racial working-class unity will not be produced spontaneously. Not only will it require struggles for universal, class-wide demands for higher wages, greater job security, universal health care, etc., but it will also require race specific struggles for plant and industry-wide seniority, affirmative action in hiring and promotion, legalization and a path to citizenship for undocumented workers, an end to racial discrimination and harassment and the like.

Strong unions and other class-against-class organizations are necessary, but not sufficient to overcoming racial divisions. The self-organization of workers of color, from the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to the Negro American Labor Council to black and Latino caucuses in unions, has been a key element in building a multi-racial labor movement.

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Finally, non-workplace movements against racist police killing, for residential and educational integration and inclusion and the like are also necessary. Put simply, effective class organization and politicsâ€”the forging of working-class unity in the face of capitalism's constant reproduction of racial divisionsâ€”must include anti-racism.

[Marxist sociology](#)

[1] <https://michaelamccarthydotnet.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/silent-compulsions-capitalist-markets-and-race.pdf>

[2] <https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/1200-persistent-inequalities>

[3] <https://www.uncpress.org/book/9780807848296/black-marxism/>