

# Cedric Johnson and the Other Sixties' Nostalgia

March 1, 2019



There is something politically familiar in Cedric Johnson's two essays in *Catalyst* (Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 2017) and *New Politics* (No. 66, Winter 2019). Because his political conclusions are very general, even vague, ones that build "on broad solidarity around commonly felt needs and interest" ... by "building alliances not on identity as such, but on shared values and demonstrated commitments" (*Catalyst* 2017: 84) it is difficult to put one's finger on just what the precise political and social conclusions of his essays are. Yet, despite the rejection of sixties' nostalgia, the elegance of the language, and the contemporary originality of his arguments and supporting evidence there is the ring in Johnson's two essays of a familiar sixties' politics that sought to be the alternative first to militancy in the movement and later to Black Power "back in the day."

This was a politics that downplayed the significance of race as a dividing line in working class life and American society in general without denying the reality of racism in the aftermath of the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Simultaneously, it substituted the trade union bureaucracy for the working class in the practice of "building alliances" in its version of "coalition politics." It was associated above all with A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, two of the best-known African Americans in this country's civil rights, labor, and socialist movements. These important figures are mentioned not only in Johnson's *Catalyst* essay, but by Touré Reed as well in his *New Politics* contribution—though only in the post-Civil Rights Act phase of their political careers. Indeed, I have recently run across this reference to Rustin and the sixties a number of times in the on-going debate over the relevance and weight of race and class in left political analysis and practice. I will return to this below.

Much of what Johnson says about the failures of Black Power and the cross-class nature of Black America then and now is true and has been analyzed by others, such as Manning Marable (*Black American Politics*, Verso, 1985) among many. Johnson's argument are, of course, more up to date. I will not attempt to present a different analysis of "black exceptionalism," as he calls it, but rather an

analysis of Johnson's implied political direction. What I will call "the other" sixties nostalgia. But first, a look at the reality of "hyperincarceration" on which much of his argument is based.

### **Locking up by class and race**

The criminal "justice" system has always been a class project under capitalism with its central foundation of exclusive private property and the need to protect it. This is as true in countries that historically have had no significant racial minorities as in those that did. Indeed, in the case of the United States, if the criminal "justice" system did not lock-up offending or misbehaving white people, it would be of little use to capital. At the same time, of course, it is very selective of which white people are most likely to be arrested, tried and incarcerated. Misbehaving bankers who ruin the lives of millions by breaking or bending the law are more likely to get a bonus than a sentence, while white working-class offenders who rob or harm individuals or small businesses get the slammer. Case closed? It might be if the working class of the United States was not so racially diverse, structurally unequal, locked out of whatever channels of upward mobility there once were, and forced to compete with itself for jobs, housing, education, and much else even more intensely than in the pre-neoliberal era. Just who, then, gets incarcerated in the US?

First, it is important to distinguish between prison and jail.[1] Those in jail account for about a quarter of all those incarcerated at about 740,000 in 2016. The incarceration rate (inmates per 100,000 US residents) in jail for blacks was three-and-a-half times that for "non-Hispanic" whites, while that of (non-white) Latinos was 50% greater. This is already a sure sign of unequal treatment given that non-Hispanic whites compose 60% of the US population, blacks 13% and Latinos 18% with the rest mostly other people of color and a small number not identified by race. But jail is not the heart of today's carceral state. Over half (55%) the jail population turns over every week and the average stay is 25 days. At the heart of hyperincarceration are the federal and state prisons where those sentenced do "hard time", with the average stay in a state prison running 2.5 years. It is here too that in 32 states the death penalty applies.

The table below shows the prison population for 2016. What we see is a wildly disproportionate representation of blacks, Latinos, and other people of color composing together almost 70% of the prison population. Behind this disproportion lies the highly discriminatory practice of sentencing. Here blacks are almost six times and Latinos three times more likely to be sentenced to "hard time" in prison than whites. These disproportions have been increased somewhat by the introduction in the last twenty years of algorithms for the targeting of police operations such as PredPol and sentencing such as LSI-R which are widely used across the US. These probability-based algorithms not only incorporate the (mostly unconscious) biases of their designers and programmers, but worse still create mathematical feedback loops that increase the targeting of black neighborhoods and, hence underplay the frequency of similar crimes in white neighborhoods. The same biased feedback loops operate in sentencing algorithms. So, while Non-Hispanic whites were 34% of prison inmates in 2006, they were down to 30% a decade later. Note here that no one involved in the digitalization of criminal "justice" was required to be a raving racist, believer in white supremacy, to have voted for Donald Trump, or even necessarily to be white. The racial bias had been built into the system long ago, "blind" administration, and now technology were sufficient to perpetuate and even intensify the racial bias.

### **Population of Federal and State Prisons by Race and Ethnicity, 2016**

<u>Race</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>%</u>
Total	1,459,533	100%

Non-Hispanic White	440,200	30%
Black	487,300	33%
Latino	339,600	23%
Other*	192,433	16%

\* Mostly Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Asians, and a small number of those not designated by race.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (2018) *Prisoners in 2016*.

That these figures are in part the result of the War on Drugs, zero tolerance policies as well as “broken-windows” law enforcement is true enough. That black middle-class professionals and politicians played a contradictory and even reactionary role in demanding or developing these policies, as Johnson argues, is undeniable—although it is most certainly a subordinate role in terms of federal and state policy and practice. Indeed, whether in the old ghetto or today’s leafy black neighborhoods, the black middle class and petty bourgeoisie have always played a contradictory role in the long struggle for black freedom. None of this refutes the existence of both underlying structures of racial inequality or the practice of racism in the criminal “justice” system as countless studies have shown. It is also the case, as Johnson points out, that black working-class people in today’s black “exclusive class zone” (*Catalyst* 2017: 83) have demanded the police protection they are routinely denied. Given the outsized presence of the police in stop and frisk, drug sweeps, the deployment of militarized SWAT teams, and other operations in poor black neighborhoods, this itself is quite a comment on the racially selective class nature of policing today. Stopping, frisking, harassing, arresting and incarcerating disproportionate numbers of black males is not the same thing as providing protection to the majority of black residents.

The escalation of incarceration is not simply a matter of controlling the “surplus population,” as Johnson argues. It is, as I stated above, a class project, but one with racist assumptions and practices. Those who are sentenced to prison are not primarily from the “surplus population.” In fact, nearly two-thirds of the prison population were employed prior to incarceration. 49% of all prisoners were employed full-time and another 16% in part-time work before entering prison, while another 8% were students, retired, or permanently disabled according to a study by the National Center for Education Statistics. To be sure many of these jobs would have been poorly paid, and some who held them had probably moved in and out of the labor force, but only 19% of prisoners in 2014 were unemployed at the time of incarceration. Johnson’s inclusion of low-paid workers in the “surplus population” or reserve army of labor dismisses its functions in capital accumulation and becomes too broad a group to have much meaning.

The functions of the “surplus population” or reserve army of labor is to depress wages by increasing competition, as Johnson points out, but also to provide a pool of available workers to fill the entry slots in new or growing industries in accordance with the needs of capital accumulation. Today, this would include industries such as healthcare, hospitality, food service, warehousing, etc. To fulfill these tasks those in the reserve army must be either unemployed, between jobs, or “not in the labor force”, including women doing family care. Some students and retired people can fill in part time jobs as well. If employed workers are counted as part of the reserve army, however, the 28% of those employed who earn below the poverty line or possibly the 30% of the workforce that draws on some form of government aid in order to get by (percentages that would be significantly larger if only working class employees were counted) are included along with the millions of unemployed and those “not in the labor force” or marginally attached to it, the concept would be a useless analytical

tool.

The conclusion that race and racism are major factors in determining who does “hard time” in prison, just as they strongly influence who gets the worst jobs and who faces racial harassment and even violence on-the-job no matter what it pays is simply unavoidable. Every year some 90,000 cases are filed with the EEOC the majority of which deal with race and mostly come from employed workers. This does not include court cases, grievances filed over racial harassment or discrimination, or the countless numbers of those in employment who suffer in silence. Johnson is right that Jim Crow is not an apt name for the subjective, structural, institutional, material, and political forms and underpinnings of racism as they have evolved since the civil rights era and deepened with the advent of neoliberalism. But race, unscientific category that it is, remains a major basis, cutting across class, for sorting out of who gets what in American society. To reject this reality is not to adopt a class perspective, but on the contrary to reject the working class of this country in all its actually existing inequality, diversity, and increased competition.

### **The “other” sixties nostalgia or choosing the wrong Randolph and Rustin**

As noted above, Johnson and a growing number of others who favor what they believe is a class orientation and reject “identity politics” have referred to the political direction proposed by Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph in the mid-1960s—what I call the “other” sixties nostalgia. Both are important figures in US history and their politics deserve reviewing. The problem here is that their politics changed in important ways at a crucial point in the development of the long black freedom struggle and neither their previous views on black self-organization nor the cross-class direction they proposed in the wake of the passage of the Civil Rights Act receive the attention they require by those who cite their post-1964 coalition politics. In light of the debate on race and class today we need to look at their views on both black self-organization and coalition politics as they evolved.

Randolph was a self-proclaimed socialist and a longstanding advocate and practitioner of black self-organization that frequently excluded whites and put forth demands relating specifically to blacks, as well as a believer in working class solidarity and advancement. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids was an entirely black union, though one supposes if there had been any white porters or maids (a very unlikely possibility at that time) they could have joined the union. When Randolph organized the first March on Washington movement in 1941 (with Rustin’s aid) to demand black jobs in the nation’s growing defense industries, however, he insisted that it be an “all-black” movement that excluded even white supporters. In announcing the planned march Randolph stated:

On to Washington, ten thousand black Americans...We will not call on our white friends to march with us. There are some things Negroes must do alone. This is our fight and we must see it through. (Herbert Garfield (1969) *When Negroes March*. New York: Anetheum)

To the disappointment of many the march scheduled for July 1, 1941 was canceled when Roosevelt signed executive order 8802 establishing a “fair employment practices committee” to prevent discrimination in defense and government employment. Many felt 8802 was inadequate.

In the 1950s, Randolph organized the Negro American Labor Council (NALC), again an exclusively black organization, to fight specifically for the rights of black workers in the labor movement. The NALC was itself an umbrella organization of black caucuses that existed throughout the labor movement long before anyone had spoken of “black power,” much less “identity politics”. This included black caucuses in industrial unions such as the United Auto Workers and the United Steel Workers where, in both cases, blacks were largely excluded from skilled trades jobs despite (or because of?) the liberalism of the unions’ leaders.

Randolph and the NALC did constant battle throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s not only with George Meany and the exclusionary building trade unions but with liberals and the social democratic leaders of the garment unions as well. He was routinely attacked as undermining class solidarity, advocating dual unionism, and practicing “racism in reverse”. To these charges Rustin, then an aid to Randolph, replied in 1961 “Under present conditions—i.e., general segregation and discrimination, and the unreliability of today’s organized (or disorganized) liberalism—the Negro finds it necessary in many instances to organize independently.” Was this “identity politics” without the label? Or was it the recognition that in the struggle for black freedom and equality black self-organization was an indispensable tool even (or perhaps particularly) where unity and solidarity with whites was expected as in the labor movement but often denied?

Less than four years later Rustin was singing a different tune in his influential essay “From Protest to Politics” published in February 1965 in *Commentary* as well as in the subsequent articles cited by Johnson. In all of these Rustin argued for the strategy known as realignment already advocated by some socialists, notably Michael Harrington. The vehicle for and object of this realignment was, of course, the Democratic Party. As Rustin put it in the 1965 essay:

The future of the Negro struggle depends in whether the contradictions of this society can be resolved by a coalition of progressive forces which becomes the *effective* political majority in the United States. I speak of the coalition which staged the March on Washington, passed the Civil Right Act, and laid the basis for the Johnson landslide—Negroes, trade unionists, liberals, and religious groups.

Apparently, by that time the liberals, including yesterday’s discriminating white labor leaders had become “dependable.” In fact, the coalition Rustin described had already begun its disintegration as the movement reached a crossroads spurred by the dramatic events of 1964. These included the explosive campaign led by King and its repression in Birmingham, Alabama; the first of the urban riots in Harlem; the passage of the Civil Rights Act; and the rejection of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s (MFDP) at the Democratic National Convention at the hands of not only Lyndon Johnson, but the very liberals and union leaders who were supposed to be the major elements in this “coalition of progressive forces” that Rustin, Harrington, and others saw as the key to realignment. In “From Protest to Politics” Rustin defends the “compromise” offered the MFDP delegates as a victory.

Realignment as an electoral strategy was always a top-down project in which liberal office holders and pressure group advocates in the Democratic Party dominated and labor leaders were the junior partners who substituted for the working class or even the union membership. “The politics of insider negotiation” Johnson says Rustin later developed (*Catalyst* 2017: 66) were not an aberration in this version of coalition politics, but the *modus operandi* of the realignment strategy from the start. This was a political method that led to an alliance not just with liberals but with none other than George Meany, the labor leader who refused to endorse the 1963 march on Washington, backed the 1964 rejection of the MFDP delegation, and with whom Randolph had crossed swords just a couple of years earlier. That, in turn, led Rustin to support the war in Vietnam and later to oppose affirmative action in the building trades. It was never a class orientation, but an effort to make one of the nation’s pre-eminent cross-class, bourgeois-dominated institutions stand in for actual working-class political organization and even for a social democratic politics the Democratic Party was incapable of adopting.[2]

The rejection of the MFDP by Democratic big wigs, liberals, and labor leaders and the humiliating “compromise” they offered the black delegation was central to the new direction SNCC activists, most visibly Stokely Carmichael, would take in the next couple of years. Though the slogan “black power” would not be publicly articulated by Carmichael or anyone else until the spring of 1966, the

idea that the civil rights, non-violent (or in Rustin's terms "protest") phase of the movement had reached its limits, and that deeper forms of power were needed to advance the interests of the black population were becoming universal. Rustin proposed one version, Carmichael and others another, Martin Luther King, Jr. still another a little later in the form of the Poor Peoples' Campaign that led to his fatal presence in support of the Memphis sanitation workers' strike. This latter direction being the closest to a genuine class politics.

The great irony of all of this is that by the late 1970s all the currents in black and coalition politics regardless of label or intention—the opportunist urban politicians, the "poverty pimps" of the short-lived War on Poverty and its community control aftermath, most of the Black Power (capital B, capital P) militants, and the top-down realigners—all ended up in the same place: the Democratic Party. That is, the party that escalated the War in Vietnam, that began its long journey to the political center and beyond in the mid-1970s, abandoned urban aid in the 1980s in tandem with Reagan, ended "welfare as we know it" and escalated the carceral state under Clinton in the 1990s, and deeply disappointed those who believed that "Yes, we can" under the neoliberal leadership of Barack Obama.

In the last couple of years, the unexpected, unprecedented campaign of Bernie Sanders for the Democratic presidential nomination, the growth of DSA, and the election of democratic socialists Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and Rashida Tlaib to the House of Representatives along with a number of like-minded leftists to lesser offices all as Democrats have helped to revive the effort to move the Democratic Party to places it has never been. Among those places where it once was under pressure of a massive labor upsurge now revived with a Green prefix, of course, was the other major source of social democratic nostalgia, the New Deal—the severe class and racial limits of which Dan La Botz and Mia White point out in their articles (*New Politics* No.66, Winter 2019). This recent resurrection of "boring within" the Democratic Party, without the anachronistic "realignment" branding to be sure, has been given even further encouragement by the apparent adoption of some left demands such a Medicare for All, Federal Job Guarantees, the Green New Deal, etc. by some of the candidates for Democratic presidential nomination besides Bernie. The genuine threat and practice of the Trump Administration adds fuel to this fire.

With this renewed hope has come a demotion of race as a subject of socio-economic analysis in the name of class that is, in reality, a return to America's quintessential business-funded, neoliberal-dominated, undemocratic, cross-class social construction: the Democratic Party. As a Marxist who has put class at the center of my analyses over the years I naturally believe it will take more than the efforts of black Americans, or even blacks and Latinos combined to end economic and racial inequality. It will take a class-based movement and politics, with socialist politics at its center. But I also have seen both first hand through involvement in the civil rights and labor movements as well as through study and research that embedded racism requires the self-organization of the oppressed to shape or supplement the broader programs in such a way that that they do not simply reproduce racial inequality in new, sometimes less visible forms as they often have in the past; e.g., in the New Deal and the post-WWII GI Bill, etc.

Among other things, the geographic reality of de facto segregation means substandard education, housing, food, and services for blacks, along with punitive welfare and policing operations. Medicare for All, Federal Jobs Guarantee, a decent minimal or living wage, and a Green New Deal are all things we must fight for and that would improve the lives of everyone. But as they fail to alter the geography of race and leave the delivery of services and the content of jobs in private/capitalist hands, racial and gender discrimination, harassment, and violence, along with unequal implementation, delivery, and administration will remain embedded if not specifically rooted out. These "universal" programs also leave the harassment, bullying and violence that blacks experience in the workplace, "be their payment high or low" in the hands of managers who tolerate these even

when they don't actually participate in them—hence the 90,000 EEOC and countless law suits filed each year. Liberals, social democrats, and even unions have repeatedly failed to address these consequences of racism when oppressed people have not fought militantly for such change or when they have been too poorly organized or too weak to enforce it.

The sixties failed to produce the sort of class-based politics and political organization capable of bringing serious social change. Nostalgia for that era cannot be a guide to the tasks of the present and future. As one who supported (and supports) the right of black self-organization and worked in coalition with the Panthers in Brooklyn in 1968 (a largely positive experience), I don't mind saying that this goes for the hope that something like the Black Panther Party will "Save Us Now." But it also goes for the more active contemporary fantasy and alternative bit of nostalgia that coalescing in the Democratic Party will be the salvation for a left long in the wilderness but now growing again. This time, we need to take both class and race seriously.

[1] All figures for jail and prison are from 2018 US Department of Justice reports. In these reports an important distinction is made between those considered "white" and "Non-Hispanic Whites" which gives a clearer picture of the role of race.

[2] One of the best answers to Rustin's "From Protest to Politics" at that time appeared in *New Politics* (Vol. V, No. 4 (Fall 1966), pp. 47-65) by its editor Julius Jacobson under the mocking title of "From Protest to Politicking."