

Continuing the Discussion on Black Politics

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Responding to Cedric Johnson's "Who's Afraid of Left Populism?," *New Politics*, Issue 66, Winter 2019.

In a moment of profound political and economic and planetary crisis, the socialist movement in the United States faces opportunities and dangers of enormous proportions. Owing more to the depth of the failures of capitalism than to the demonstrated strength of the socialist movement (thus far), millions of people (particularly, young people) have come to the conclusion that capitalism is the root of the problem and that some kind of "socialism"—broadly defined—would be better.

The idea of solidarity, the need for organization, questioning the priorities of elites, and opposition to racism, sexism, and all forms of discrimination and oppression are parts of a growing common sense among this broad left consciousness. Thus far, this sentiment is most clearly articulated, in this country, in the form of its largest socialist organization, the Democratic Socialists of America.

At the same time there is a resurgence of black radical organizing, most visible in the form of anti-police brutality and murder protests, and organizing efforts related in various ways to the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter coined by three black women after the acquittal of the murderer of Trayvon Martin in 2013. A large number of black millennials were radicalized by the persistence of institutional racism and brutality, particularly under the administration of the nation's first black President and first black attorney general.

But can these two developments be fused? These two trends both have a rich history in the United States, and have had important moments of generative interplay and fusion—most famously in the 1930s and 1940s when the Communist Party USA recruited thousands of black radicals and provided important resources to anti-racist organizing nationwide.

In a recent contribution to this journal ("*Who's Afraid of Left Populism?*"), socialist scholar Cedric Johnson surveys the present landscape of left black discourse and concludes that the current trends among black radicals point away from the ideas of solidarity, point away from tackling the issues most pertinent to working-class black people, miss an opportunity to build a constituency among non-black people, and are motivated by the imperatives of social media point-scoring on the one hand and the making of academic careers on the other.

Rather than helping people understand the relationship between racism and exploitation, Johnson contends that the “political defeatism” of black left commentary is actually making it harder for people to connect the dots. “My argument,” he writes, “is that Black Lives Matter, and cognate notions such as the New Jim Crow, have been useful in galvanizing popular outrage over policing and mass incarceration, but these same banners have simultaneously enshrouded the very social relations they claim to describe and led away from the kind of politics, one predicated on building broad, popular power, that is necessary to roll back the carceral state.”

I support Johnson’s goal of building broad, popular power. I also think that Johnson is correct that that requires being willing to engage with a class analysis, a willingness to be critical of black figures in positions of power, and having an analysis of the fault lines of the Trump era that reveals opportunities for recruiting non-black people. But I think Johnson over-diagnoses the problem. Where he sees danger, I see opportunity and where I see opportunity, he sees danger.

Where I see an opportunity to educate a broader public about the history and nature of racism in the United States and thereby strengthen the left, Johnson sees a danger of over-emphasizing the centrality of racism in U.S. political life and thereby obscuring the class relations at the root of inequality. Where he sees an opportunity to build a broad left populism, I see a danger in failing to win non-black people to understanding the importance of challenging racism.

I disagree that one can accurately sum up “Black Lives Matter” and “New Jim Crow” as discourses that emphasize racism in a way that obscures class relations. Several of the most widely cited books in this domain, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, and *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* by Ibram X. Kendi, are all good examples of popular black left writing that, contrary to Johnson’s assessment, actually attempt to educate a broad public about the way racism works in U.S. history and society, and to do so in a way that points readers’ attention quite explicitly to the exploitative relationships that make racism so necessary and useful.

The popularity of the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project is another indicator of the tendency of contemporary race-centric analyses (for lack of a better phrase) to point in radical directions. Among the series are essays that argue that the vicious, less-regulated American version of capitalism owes its character to the slave economy, that racism (linked to anti-communism) played an important role in thwarting the implementation of universal health care in this country, and so on. In sum, the growing ecosystem of U.S. “race commentary” at the very least is inclusive of authors whose work can hardly be reduced to “racial identity politics” and can more accurately be described as “radical” and even “anti-capitalist.”

But Johnson has another argument—all of this “racial identity” talk has nothing to do with real life and real struggles. Johnson uses Asad Haider as a foil, claiming that the left’s orientation towards foregrounding anti-racism “may score points in the seminar room or basement study group, but this rhetoric, however well-intentioned, has little to do with the internal workings of political life, how people perceive their immediate interests and priorities in real time and space, and the ways that union drives, city council campaigns, class-action lawsuits against polluters, parent-teacher meetings about pending state tests, and the like...”

Johnson argues that the rise of a black middle class—including the ascendance of black politicians—removes the need for “racial identity politics.” But we have witnessed in recent years black parents calling out black school officials for implementing standardized testing systems that are racist, black families and neighbors protesting against murderous—and yes, racist—black police and black mayors who protect them (Baltimore), and more. Racism often is central to the ways these

attacks play out, regardless of the complexions of the perpetrators. In my experience organizing with parents, teachers, and students against the privatization of public schools, I have frequently found myself in multiracial rooms of people trying to understand how people of color in positions of power seemed to be carrying out policies that hurt other people of color, and how and why some white people were being hurt by those policies, too. Racism continues to be a tool in the hands of elites, and in the field of education, a brand of faux anti-racism has become a weapon of choice, too (for instance charter schools branded as a “new Civil Rights Movement”).

“In large and complex urban areas,” Johnson later argues, “where black power has long been institutionalized and entrenched, analyses that ignore the actually existing class relations and interests shaping incarceration and the political arena will do little to advance the kind of substantive reforms touted by the most progressive elements of anti-policing protests.” Yes, we have to grapple with these complications—as several authors and activists have done (James Forman, Jr., whom Johnson cites, among them). But in doing so, we still have to win white people to vigilant anti-racism, which cannot be accomplished only through broad populist demands. The Chicago Teachers Union (whose membership is mostly white) is, as I write this, on strike calling out both the black female mayor and the way in which inequalities in the Chicago Public Schools fall disproportionately on black and brown youth. Being specific and honest about patterns of racism in the funding and support for schools has strengthened the CTU’s hand, not weakened it.

Also, it is well-documented that black people (and black women in particular) struggled with and against previous socialist and communist movements, finding both unique opportunities in those circles and exclusions/blind spots. The point of re-reading the Combahee River Collective and taking its notions seriously is that it opens up the possibility of thinking about a path not taken—a more inclusive socialist movement in the present. The point is not to pander to black people and people of color, but to build a bigger movement. In the end, the emphasis on anti-racism might be more important for the impact it can have on white people. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which Johnson counterposes to the CRC, was so effective precisely because it had a radical anti-racist core of communist and socialist organizers. They built the unions from the bottom up. They helped working-class people from many different backgrounds to see where their common interests lay, but they also asked their non-black coworkers to sign petitions and raise funds for the Scottsboro Boys.

Lastly, Johnson addresses the “Blue Lives Matter” presidency of Donald J. Trump. Trump, he argues, pits the middle class against a “relative surplus population.”

“Blame-labeling the black urban poor and immigrants further distracts an already anxious middle class and secures their interests as consumer-citizens to the reproduction of the capitalist order,” as he puts it. “Trumpism appeals to the real economic anxieties of those Americans who can recall the last days of a vibrant manufacturing-based economy.”

“His protectionist ideas as well as his xenophobia beckon many Americans, not just whites, back to a nostalgic ideal of unending compound growth and middle-class consumption. This is where the legitimacy of the current carceral order resides, and it is unlikely that progressive left forces can create a more just alternative without engaging broad swaths of the population, wrestling with real and imagined anxieties, fears, and felt needs. Indeed, that is the only way to turn the tide against Trump’s authoritarian populism and produce a more just, egalitarian society.”

The real stakes of Johnson’s argument, it seems, is that he fears that the “Black Lives Matter” line of thinking fails to appeal to broad swaths of the population who are not having their needs met. This is true, of course, and a new radical movement is attempting to speak to those unmet needs. But just talking about class or neoliberalism is not necessarily the only way to do that. In my view, a

movement that speaks only the language of the lowest common denominator is insufficient. The United States has long desperately needed a widespread anti-racist movement that is not confined to the people on the receiving end of racism. The disruptive BLM campaigns have helped to shift popular conceptions of police and racism, particularly among young people of all backgrounds. The way to solidarity is not always a straight line between demands and constituents. If we just shout “all lives matter” instead of “black lives matter,” we will not automatically get a bigger movement and have built solidarity. Sometimes people have to shout about their own pain because it hurts, and if they create enough momentum, they present a new side to political discourse and other people, who don’t feel that exact same pain, decide to join them.

That’s why the current crop of critiques of the New Deal are useful. Understanding the limitations of the New Deal doesn’t only lead to cynicism, but can help us understand how previous anti-poverty programs helped to undergird new forms of inequality. Johnson thinks these critiques lead to cynicism about the potential of left populism. But I think he has it backwards. It’s the persistence of inequality, apparently in the face of historic large-scale efforts to defeat it. that breeds cynicism ... unless we can explain it!

Are there identitarians on social media who don’t see the importance of building coalition and a broad working-class movement, who use their platform to promote their own brand of thought, to advance their career, score points in academic circles, and so on? Sure. But is that an accurate or useful analysis of the way large numbers of people are thinking about the meaning of “the New Jim Crow” or “Black Lives Matter”? I don’t think so. I think quite a few writers (and yes, even some academics) are trying to link the concepts of racism and capitalism, and are finding an audience for that work. Yes, there is a way to emphasize the importance of racism that, at bottom, is about foreclosing the possibility of solidarity. But that is not the only way, and there are plenty of people working overtime to emphasize the importance of racism in U.S. society precisely so that we can have genuine solidarity.

If millions of working-class white people learn to see racism as a pervasive evil—if they learn to see it in their kids’ curriculum, if they see it in the little jokes at work, if they see it in the president’s policies, in the unfairness of hiring and firing happening right in front of them, in the zoning of their neighborhood, of their school, in the country’s history, if they see a black athlete kneeling during the national anthem and think, “right on!”, then we will have a chance at building a movement that takes seriously the idea that an injury to one really is an injury to all.