Race, Crisis, and Resistance in the United States

written by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Phil Gasper | January 14, 2021

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor is an assistant professor in the Department of African American Studies at Princeton University. She is author of *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*, published in 2019 by the University of North Carolina Press, longlisted for a 2019 National Book Award for nonfiction, and a 2020 finalist for the Pulitzer in history. Taylor's book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* won the Lannan Cultural Freedom Award for an Especially Notable Book in 2016. She is also editor of *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, which won the Lambda Literary Award for LGBQT nonfiction in 2018. Taylor is a columnist for the *New Yorker*.

New Politics board member Phil Gasper interviewed Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor in October 2020. The interview was subsequently transcribed and edited for length.

***Phil Gasper for* New Politics:** *So, 2020 has been a roller-coaster of a year. It began with Trump surviving his impeachment trial, then the outbreak of the worst global pandemic in 100 years, which in turn resulted in a massive economic crisis. But the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on Memorial Day led to what has been called the biggest protest movement in U.S. history, with Black Lives Matter marches across the country protesting police violence and racism. On the left, there are significant differences about how to understand the relationship between racism and capitalism, between race and class. These have surfaced recently in debates within the Democratic Socialists of America. Can you talk about the general issue?*

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor: So, that's been the perennial debate within the American left, I think we can say, for more than the last 100 years. What should the attitude of the left be towards racism? At one point, the "Negro question" was how it was framed. And, you know, I think the reason why it's such an important question is because of the cynical way that race has been manipulated by the ruling class, those who are at the helm of our society, to produce a particularly favorable outcome for themselves. Whether that is championing white supremacy as an explicit political program in the South, or whether that is manipulating competition over scarcity of resources outside of the South as a way to divert attention away from why there is scarcity in the land of plenty—to set, essentially, poor and working-class people against each other. So, it makes this question of race and racism an enormously important political question, because it has been wielded so successfully by those who are in power to maintain the status quo.

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And there’s a history that I think that we can look to that shows the limitations of pursuing just universal programs. I think we can look at the New Deal. I’m teaching a class on race and inequality this semester, and I just used an essay that Adolph Reed wrote for the *New Republic* about understanding that the New Deal is not inherently, or not universally, racist, so that we should [not] just condemn the New Deal and say that it offers no insights into public policy in the United States.[1] The article is an important rejoinder to those who would just dismiss that body of legislation as categorically insufficient to the needs of African Americans. In one sense, that categorical dismissal doesn’t actually help us understand how African Americans went from voting almost exclusively Republican before the New Deal, to voting almost exclusively Democrat after it. If it had no consequences in the lives of Black people, it’s hard to imagine how that transformation happened. So, I think that we can say that, even though it was written in such a way to write out Black people, the benefits were so enormous that it was impossible for Black people to be completely excluded from them. And the benefits were enough to convince African Americans that perhaps they should align themselves with the Democratic Party and not the Republican Party.

I think we can also look at what Ira Katznelson has written. He wrote a book called *When Affirmative Action Was White*[2] that looks specifically at the New Deal and the GI Bill. But he begins the book with the question, how do we understand how people who were relatively close to each other in material conditions in the 1930s end up in two completely separate worlds by the beginning of the 1960s? You can’t say that Black and white workers in the 1930s were in the same financial position before the New Deal. But, certainly, the chasm was not as exaggerated as it would be thirty or forty years later. After many white workers enjoyed the benefits of the New Deal and the GI Bill, that chasm got much wider—so much so, that Black people have to riot and burn cities down in order to get the state to recognize the enormous levels of deprivation in Black communities. And so, he says, we have to look at how the benefits of the New Deal and the GI Bill were distributed over time that led to the foundation of what white people would see as the American Dream by the 1960s, and for Black people would lead to what Malcolm X described as an American nightmare. So, the point is that universal programs can have a trickle-down effect for Black people just by the sheer size and scope of them. But is that enough, in and of itself, in a thoroughly and completely racist society, to have the same uplifting impact for Black people? And I just think that there is an enormous bevy of historical evidence that says universality in and of itself is not enough. And this was the whole reason why affirmative action, also in the 1960s, became a powerful political current, because it was understood that if you don’t explicitly create opportunities, benefits, programs that are directed at Black people, Black people will get left out.

I think even today, if you look at something like Social Security, where it absolutely is available to most workers—there are certain caveats for teachers, but for most workers across the board—but what you get paid is dependent on your lifetime of earnings. And so, if you are Black and had been subjected to job discrimination, racist wage differentials, then that also gets reflected in this universal program that you may have access to but is afforded you in a different way. So, I think that we have to take seriously the demands of Black people that there be particular programs instituted to make sure that African Americans don't get left behind. And I think politically, as a question for the left, the way that racism so deeply shapes American society, it really is impossible to imagine building a genuine multiracial movement without taking up the specific grievances of Black people, which cannot just simply be reduced to questions of class. There are particular ways that Black people experience oppression that affect the rate of exploitation that they experience as a disproportionately working-class population. And it is literally impossible to imagine a genuine movement that reflects the demands or aspirations of Black people for self-determination, some sense of freedom, without actually taking up the specific ways that Black people are oppressed in the United States.

NP: *A term that is being used a lot lately is "racial capitalism." Does this concept help to shed light*

on these issues? If there's racial capitalism, can there be non-racial capitalism? Or are these two systems linked together so closely that one must always consider them as part of the same system?

KYT: This is an interesting question that I'm trying to think through. I don't use the term "racial capitalism" in my work. Everyone says the last book that I wrote, *Race for Profit*,[3] about race and real estate, is a work of racial capitalism. And yet I don't use the term anywhere in the book, even though Michelle Alexander has a blurb on the front cover with "racial capitalism" in it. In some ways, "racial capitalism" has become like "neoliberalism," which is this incredibly elastic term whose meaning is in the eye of the beholder. And it's never clear if people are actually talking about the same things. So, I just read something a couple of days ago that described racial capitalism by referencing Cedric Robinson's book *Black Marxism*,[4] saying here is where we see race and capitalism first described as co-constitutive and this work has been a useful intervention, blah, blah, blah. And it's like, no, that's actually not what Cedric Robinson is writing about. He in fact says something very different: that race pre-dates capitalism, that race is the shaping factor, trans-historically and socially.

But I think that what has happened is that it's become this term, that I'm sympathetic to, that people use to try to draw attention to the close relationship between race and capitalism in the United States and its formation and to explain this history and how we understand the centrality of racism to American society and to American capitalism. But I do think that it's important to be precise. I should also say, in that same vein, that racial capitalism came to be, I think in the last ten years, an intervention, at least in the academy, in [discussions of] new studies about capitalism and slavery that just omitted race, that claim that race wasn't really a factor or that it was secondary, marginal, and that this is really about a kind of analysis of political economy. And so, the arguments around racial capitalism that I think come into fashion and then very quickly become popularized are in response to that. And people look back to Du Bois and Eric Williams[5] to try to make a more complicated argument about race and capitalism, but understanding that race is very much a part of what comes out of these economic relationships and conditions and can't just be seen as a kind of peripheral thing that you can either talk about or not. So, to that end, I'm sympathetic with why it has come back into usage and the ways that people are trying to use it.

On the other hand, I see there's still use in understanding a distinction between racism and capitalism. And, you know, this is the way that I write about these issues—that race comes out of capitalist relations as a way to rationalize and justify various unequal relationships. I also think that the kind of narrow focus on this thing we refer to as "racial capitalism" can miss the ways in which capitalism divides people in all sorts of ways. It is an economic system where wealth and resources are concentrated at the top of society, and part of the way that the top of society manages the inevitable inequality that develops out of that relationship is through the incitement of oppression. And, you know, it sounds simple but it's complicated and it's complex, the notion of divide and conquer. But I'm not sure how else we understand how such a small group of people is able to maintain control over vast numbers of people, even as they suffer incredibly through hardship and as a result of this kind of inequality.

So, capitalism divides people along the lines of the invented category of race. And all these categories are invented—religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation. These are all bases upon which people had been divided in the United States. It happens along the lines of race, but you know, there's the example that Marx himself used about Ireland and England, where you can have just as vicious caricatures and demonization of people who look exactly like you, and thus you are forced to find some other fault line to divide people along.[6] And so there it's religion. So, I think that the narrow focus on racial capitalism ignores a more general dynamic and tendency for capitalism itself. And it also speaks to the hegemony of the United States as this framework that, even if it

circulates on the left here, then becomes this kind of dominant way that we look at the world to the exclusion of other forms of oppression elsewhere. And that's the power of being in the most powerful country in the world. But it distorts the way that we understand how this system functions globally.

NP: *Let's talk a little about what's happening in the United States right now. I began by mentioning these incredible and unexpected protests that we've seen in the second half of 2020. At a point when we were in lockdown and this health crisis was raging, it seems the most unlikely time for a mass protest movement to emerge. It's also been very multiracial. And right now—we're talking in October—the level of protests has dropped, but they are still continuing in many cities around the United States, so it's very long lived. What are the roots of this? What can you say about the origins and the size of the protests?*

KYT: Well, I mean, the first thing I can say is that it was very shocking. In April, I remember I wrote this thing in the *New York Times*—are we going to have to figure out new ways to protest?[7] I think I used a line like, "What can you do when there's nothing to be done?" Or, "What can be done when there's nothing we can do?" And part of that was just like the shock of the pandemic itself. And, you know, it was still at a point where no one really knew anything about what its consequence would be. But, you know, I think that there was something about the effects of the pandemic, the particular effects in Black communities, and I think that there's a way that these sorts of things are typically hidden. Because all these disparities exist all the time. The Black life expectancy, the way that Black people receive health care—you know, all of the things that have been highlighted by the pandemic, they exist all the time. But for the first time they were being highlighted in terms of the impact of the virus in Black communities. And I think that people were forced to deal with that—and it's certainly the case now, the extent to which we continue to talk about poverty and deprivation in the face of the pandemic, but also this economic crisis. You know, some of it has to do with the fact that Trump is president. There's much more of a willingness to talk openly about hardship in the United States—whether that is to embarrass him, whether it's because it's an election year—in ways that have been impossible to talk about it when Democrats are in power. And so, I think that that is also a part of it.

But there's a way that those factors, being an active part of a public discussion, then intersect with the insanity of watching this public murder of George Floyd. And I think in the same way it was impossible to calculate in Ferguson what is the actual last straw? What is the tipping point where people are no longer willing to just, you know, protest quietly? What is it that tips this over into an uprising? And it's impossible to calculate, but there was something about the brutal public nature of this killing, with this cop who looked like he could have been watching a football game while this Black man is begging and pleading for his life in the midst of an epidemic that is just killing Black people left and right. And I think, you know, there was something about the combination of those two things that, similar to Ferguson, if we don't do something, then what is the value, what is the meaning of Black life in this country? Because this also came on the heels … The Breonna Taylor situation was not quite as public, but we had all watched Ahmaud Arbery just shot down like a dog in the streets in Georgia, and the two white men who were involved with that suffered no consequence. They're not even arrested. It's a situation that defies comprehension. And I think that the tension that had obviously been building around the uncertainty of the pandemic just clashed with the public killing in a way that was unpredictable but not surprising.

I think that the longevity [of the protests] speaks to the absolute cynicism that people have about the possibility for substantive change to actually occur—because people saw four or five years ago out of the Ferguson uprising, then Baltimore, there's a focus on body cameras, there's a presidential commission, there are all these things that don't actually change anything. And, you know, the protests began to wrap up then, but the police killings continued to go on. This time around, even though I don't think—especially in June—that this was the result of some organizing prowess, I do

think that the political experiences of people who had been active in Black Lives Matter over the last several years enabled them to very quickly put forward political demands and political framing that helped to give some cohesion politically and to shape the objectives of protesters. And I think that some of those were kind of writ large nationally, but on the ground, local organizers were able to inject their own frameworks and demands in ways that gave people a reason to continue to mobilize.

I think the whole issue of defunding the police was a brilliant intervention, because it immediately connected the issue of police abuse and violence to this larger issue of the failure of the state in so many ways to respond to all of these other crises. And the immediate question everywhere was why do the police get all the resources while we have all these other problems here? Why are the police so able to quickly coordinate their attacks on protesters, but there's no cohesion, there's no coordination, when it comes to dealing with the issues of the virus? And I think that the clarity of those sorts of questions that were relevant to every single municipality that had a protest is part of what continued to keep the protests alive.

Of course, in addition, there's the sheer insanity of police. I mean this was, in some ways, like a national awakening, probably, for white people about what Black people have always known—that the police are completely out of control. And you can see that for yourself. It's on the news every night: Police in Buffalo pushing over some 75-year-old man and sending him to the hospital. Police in New York just attacking people for absolutely no reason. Peaceful protests in Philadelphia attacked with military-grade chemical warfare. This was the nightly news for weeks, and that, in and of itself, became part of the objective of continuing to protest.

And then there were ways that that morphed into other political issues in a place. So, I live in Philadelphia, and some of the organizers here immediately used the cover of the riots and uprising to stage an occupation of public property and to set up encampments for homeless people, to draw attention to the housing crisis here. And they describe that as a Black Lives Matter action because most of the homeless in Philadelphia are African American. And they were successful. They held an occupation for 126 days and forced the city to do unprecedented things to resolve this conflict because the city, on three separate occasions, announced that they were going to sack the encampment and they couldn't do it because they were afraid it would open a new front in the protest movement here locally. So, in the end, they decided to transfer title of fifty properties, to create a community land trust, to these organizers. There were two encampments—one had a 150 people in it. They found housing for all those people.

So, it didn't just stay narrowly focused on issues of police. And defunding the police, even though it was panned by Democratic Party strategists—Karen Bass said this was the worst slogan ever created[8]—actually opened up a world of different possibilities and created the conditions for the protest movement to continue, because it wasn't just focused on a specific case or a specific incident. It made connections between the local economy, local distribution of resources, and the police as the most well-resourced public institution in every city in the United States.

NP: *You mentioned the background of the unequal impact of the pandemic on communities of color. And then in the wake of the health crisis, we get this massive economic crisis as well, which has also had a hugely disproportionate impact. Can you talk about that—what the economic impact has been and how that connects with this political moment and the kinds of demands that are being raised?*

KYT: Yeah, I think there's something interesting with that because even with the insufficient CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act), which was passed in April, it showed a few things. One, it showed that this discussion about deficits is nonsense, that the U.S. government can pull $2.2 or $3 trillion out of thin air to satisfy what it perceives as an enormous amount of need. And even in its insufficiency, where a disproportionate amount of that rescue goes to corporations,

even the meager amount that was inconsistently distributed to ordinary people actually prevented a massive slide into poverty. It raised some people out of poverty—people who were getting more from unemployment than they were actually making in wages. It showed what was possible. It showed what the U.S. government is actually capable of, and it showed what public aid can do to not just save people's lives in an immediate sense but also in terms of stabilizing the economic situation.

But just as quickly as it showed that, the willingness of Congress to just let that lapse and, with it, to allow people's livelihoods to completely disintegrate was just another log on the raging fire that is destroying the legitimacy of American institutions and, I think, the state itself, in the eyes of ordinary people, which I think is part of the political consequence that looms on the horizon. And, you know, the U.S. government was most responsive when millions of people were in the street burning cities down. It's not responsive when left to its own devices to actually come up with credible solutions to the hardship that people are experiencing. And you know, there's a lesson to be learned in that for what has to happen to actually improve the situation of regular people in this country, when the political channels that we are told are established for that just cease to function. So, that is the way that the economic situation can grab a hold of the political framework and turn it upside down and raise different kinds of questions.

As far as the impact of the economic crisis, it's tremendous—it's part of what is, I think, fueling a deep-seated radicalization in this country. Usually the U.S. says, you know, we don't have classes, this is a country where classes are fluid, everyone has social mobility. And the situation with the pandemic has really unmasked that, where you have rich people able to buffer themselves with the bodies of low-wage Black and brown workers—middle-class people to a lesser extent, because even if you are able to work at home, it doesn't resolve the issues of childcare, doesn't resolve the unequal burden that women face and the expectation that they will do this remote work but also continue to maintain a household with no additional assistance. And, you know, the struggles around hazard pay and access to PPE [personal protective equipment] and all of these things really laid bare the class nature of American society that, again, is almost always hidden or distorted or just goes undiscussed, and brought it straight to the surface of our society and made it an inescapable feature that had to be reckoned with.

Since July, when the benefits of the CARES Act expired, those contradictions are becoming even more clear. We have millions of people on the verge of eviction. The CDC [Centers for Disease Control] has this bizarre moratorium that describes eviction as a public health crisis, but it expires in January. So, is it a public health crisis now, and then it's not a public health crisis January 2? The Trump administration told landlord associations, property owning associations, that they can proceed with evictions, that the Justice Department will not intervene. Evictions have been happening throughout this. As we know, Trump is pushing this Supreme Court hearing to get his third judge on the court to get rid of Obamacare, the ACA [Affordable Care Act], in the middle of a pandemic. American workers got one check (some did: there are 30 percent of workers who never received a check) for 1,200 or 2,400 bucks—if you have a couple of kids, throw $1,000 in there—when people's lives have been completely destroyed.

So, you could go on and on about the economic consequences of the pandemic and how it's playing out in the lives of ordinary people. You see it in the schools, the issue about whether to open the schools or not. And what has been lost in this discussion is how the federal government essentially told school districts around the country to reopen on last year's budget, even though all these new issues were created, [like] the need for buildings to be refurbished and to be retrofitted to build new ventilation systems. The federal government said, "Fuck you. No. We're not paying for anything." And so that has meant that here in Philly, all the rich private schools are open. They've got tents. They spent tens of thousands of dollars for Plexiglas and for PPE. So, the rich white kids are going to school.

In the public schools, which of course are 90 percent Black and brown, you get this remote thing that you can't go in the buildings. Last year, Philly had a crisis of asbestos in its public-school buildings, let alone ventilation. There's an elementary school a few blocks from my house. It doesn't have any windows. There are no windows in the building. So, for public schools, you can't go in the building, and remotely, 15,000 of the kids don't have access to the Internet. Other kids don't have a computer. So, they get these computers, and some of them sold them over the summer so they could have money. So, the idea that the U.S. doesn't have a class issue or that we're all on the same footing—things that the left probably takes for granted [are false]—this has been an eye-opening experience for millions of people, even though much of it gets blotted out by the spectacle of Trump and the way that the media just chases after every hiccup that comes from him.

There's a similar dynamic with the election. If Trump is the evil, then the election is the cure, and the granular effects of what is happening have been lost in the larger discussion. Or it's so fragmented and local that it's hard to cohere a big picture of the utter devastation that is happening. What does it mean to say that this is the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression? It's hard to absorb that when it's all about Trump's latest antics at a debate, or "What's your plan for November 3? How are you going to vote?" I hope Trump loses, absolutely. But if anyone thinks that that's the end of the story, then it's just evidence of how people are missing the huge picture of what is happening underneath. And it's not just the economic devastation; it is the erosion of any kind of trust in the political institutions in this country. I think that there's going to be a massive turnout for the vote and that Trump is going to lose—I mean, I might be wrong, because they're doing all the dirty tricks, but I think that's the sentiment. But it's mixed with this utter cynicism that our government can't function except to put another right-wing lunatic onto the Supreme Court. Then it's a well-oiled machine. Then, you know, Dianne Feinstein's hugging everybody, and this is the best-run hearing I've ever been to. A well-oiled machine when it comes to that. But for all of these basic things that have to do with the fragility of human life, it just doesn't function at all. And the most effective thing that people have been witness to, in terms of getting the state to at least recognize the humanity of people, has been these protests and demonstrations. I think that that creates the conditions for not just a kind of continued political volatility but people will draw some political conclusions about what that means.

It's a longer discussion because then it raises the question about what is the left in the United States? What is it doing? Because I think that we've seen that radicalization creates the conditions for being open to new explanations and new politics and new strategies, but the left doesn't have a franchise on that. The right-wing offers explanations as well and offers its own version of an alternative. And so, I worry about the kind of fragmentation of the left, the lack of any coherent strategy or cohesion. There are lots of people who are doing things , but they almost seem to have no connection to each other—whether it's in Black Lives Matter, whether it is in the housing movement, whether it is the relationship between low-wage workers of color at Amazon, who were at the vanguard of activism last April, to these struggles that are happening now. So, there are many different things that are happening, but it's hard to see how they cohere, how they are in related to each other. What creates a mass movement and not just protests and demonstrations and organizing? What is it that actually brings this together, not into one single thing, but into something that has more relationships, conversations with each other, than it currently does? And, you know, it's early, but it's also very urgent and dire right now.

Notes

1. Adolph Reed, "The New Deal Wasn't Intrinsically Racist," *New Republic*, Nov. 26, 2019.

2. Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (Norton, 2006).

3. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

4. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

5. See, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (Free Press, 1999). First published in 1935. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). First published in 1944.

6. Karl Marx, letter to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, April 9, 1870, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 43 (International Publishers, 1988), 473-476.

7. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Are We at the Start of a New Protest Movement?" *New York Times*, April 13, 2020.

8. "Rep. Karen Bass: 'Defund Police' Is Probably One of the Worst Slogans Ever," *Washington Post Live*, June 15, 2020.

CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE

— **Langston Hughes,** *poet, activist, novelist, columnist, playwright of the Harlem Renaissance*

Excerpts from the 1936 poem
LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay—
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's,
Negro's, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!