

Noel Ignatiev, 1940-2019

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This article by John Garvey on the late Noel Ignatiev was originally posted by The Brooklyn Rail as an introduction to a piece by Ignatiev on Frederick Douglass. Given Ignatiev's importance as a writer on race and class in the U.S., we are re-posting Garvey's commentary on his life and work. The photo of Ignatiev was taken by Rachel Edwards. — NP editors



Noel Ignatiev, the author of the following essay on Frederick Douglass, died on November 9th of this year. Although he had been ill, he wasn't expecting death in the immediate future. In fact, he was looking forward to the publication of the essay in *The Brooklyn Rail*. The brief period of time since his death has witnessed a good number of formal obituaries and less formal reminiscences in *The New Yorker*, *Commune*, and *The New York Times*, which provide both biographical facts and descriptions of his impact and influence on students, friends and political comrades. I will try not to repeat too much of what has already been written.

Noel was a radical activist for more than 60 years. While still a teenager, he joined an obscure group called the Provisional Organizing Committee to Reconstitute the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (POC), on the "ultra-left" of the Communist Party (CP). Meaning, for example, that it supported the 1956 Russian invasion of Hungary to stop the revolution in that country and opposed the moves by the Russian CP towards a policy of "peaceful existence." While the POC initially recorded some successes in local organizing (especially in fighting police brutality against Blacks), over time it became more cult-like and obsessed with its own internal purity. Nonetheless, Noel was a diligent member and rising star of sorts in the Philadelphia branch of the group. He was shocked to be expelled in 1966, but then thrilled at having been set free to develop his own views. Years later, Noel

would say that his time spent in POC had not been a complete waste and that the group's commitment to Black liberation and Puerto Rican independence, along with the opportunities he had to work alongside Black and Puerto Rican members, had deeply influenced his own subsequent views.

His first noteworthy contribution in writing occurred in 1967 with the publication of a pamphlet titled "White Blindspot," consisting of a critical letter from Noel (then Ignatin) to the Progressive Labor Party (PL) and a letter from Ted Allen (later author of *The Invention of the White Race* [2012]) supporting Noel's arguments. (PL was another group that had emerged from a split within the CP.) His arguments focused on PL's position that the Black liberation struggle was outside the class struggle and advanced the notion that the struggle against white supremacy (and the associated privileges provided to white workers) was fundamental to the possibility of effective working class solidarity.

These arguments were especially convincing to members of SDS who were trying to defeat the efforts of PL to take over that organization and, soon afterwards, Noel was recruited to join SDS. He became a principal spokesperson of the short-lived RYM II (Revolutionary Youth Movement II) within the dying student organization. It should be noted that, at the time, Noel still considered himself a Marxist-Leninist (in other words, a Maoist opponent of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), as did Ted Allen. On the other hand, a close reading of the text reveals an independence of thought and spirit—Noel quotes George Bernard Shaw (which he continued to do for decades) and Ted insists on the importance of the development of subjectivity (including an attentiveness to matters of morality) as an essential part of revolutionary class consciousness. And both Noel and Ted relied on a close reading of W.E.B. DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* as foundational. Noel retained an appreciation for Maoism because of the emphasis it had placed on the significance of individual and collective will in changing the course of history. I believe it was the commitment to act that placed him outside the comfortable conformism of the Communist Party. Eventually, though, his restless intellect and his passionate commitments would lead him far beyond the Maoism of his younger years

Over the next 50 years, Noel was a prolific author of leaflets, articles, essays, and books and the editor of a number of publications. When he wrote, he was a meticulous craftsman and consistently drew upon an extensive knowledge of history, literature, and popular culture. He was associated with three significant political projects: the Sojourner Truth Organization (STO) from 1969 to the mid-80s, *Race Traitor* from 1993 to 2005 and *Hard Crackers* from 2016 to the present.

Noel was a member of the small group that established STO in Chicago. That organization, which endured into the mid-80s, would not have been what it was without Noel's contributions, but Noel would not have become who he did without being part of the group. There is an invaluable history of the organization by Michael Staudenmaier, *Truth and Revolution: A History of the Sojourner Truth Organization: 1969-1986* (2012) that illuminates his role. Not surprisingly, Noel did a great deal of writing for both internal discussions and public distribution. He also served as the principal editor of *Urgent Tasks*, the organization's theoretical journal.

Staudenmaier suggests that, in spite of significant changes in the group's political assessments and priorities over time (which, among other things, resulted in numerous intense debates and a number of important splits) there were enduring convictions which distinguished it from other left organizations of the time:

In every area and at every point in time STO emphasized the importance of mass action, the rejection of legal constraints on struggle, the question of consciousness within the working class, the central role of white supremacy to the continued misery of life under

capitalism, and the necessity of autonomy for exploited and oppressed groups not only from capitalism and white supremacy but also from their supposed representatives, various self-proclaimed vanguards, and any other “condescending saviors.”

In 1976, Noel authored a pamphlet titled “No Condescending Saviors,” an attempt to come to grips with the legacy of the Russian Revolution. This excerpt from the concluding chapter well represents Noel’s thinking at the time:

The communist parties of the various countries, strongly influenced by the Russian model, are products of that stage in development in which the working class is not yet capable of establishing its own class rule. These parties have been, on one hand, more or less effective instruments for waging the class struggle and, on the other hand, terrible weapons for the suppression of all strivings of the proletariat to express itself as a class independent of their control.

The working class in the developed countries no longer has need of these revolutionary mandarins. To take the most well-known of recent examples, in May of 1968 the French working class, acting under the guidance of no leading party, showed that it is “disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production,” and is capable of standing at the head of the nation — so much so that President de Gaulle went on a secret inspection tour of French military units in Germany, unable to rely any longer on those stationed in France itself, who had been exposed to the revolutionary virus.

If the general strike and factory occupation of 1968 did not lead to the conquest of power by the proletariat, it was not because the workers were insufficiently organized, or did not possess adequate weapons, or lacked means of communication, or any of the other reasons that revolutionary attempts have failed in the past. It was because the workers themselves lacked an appreciation of their own capacity to rule.

Workers do very revolutionary things, but they think of them in old ways. The French workers, who demonstrated their ability to carry out a nation-wide movement, create forms of direct democracy and regulate their relations with non-proletarian social strata—the essential tasks of any government—were unable to see that in their own actions lay the foundations of a new society. There were signs of the beginnings of such an understanding on the part of the workers, but they were stamped out by the official trade union and Communist Party leadership, which sought to interpret the events as simply a massive demonstration of the need for reform.

So long as the only models of social action articulated to the workers are either continued subordination to the bourgeoisie—the line of social democracy—or reliance on the all-knowing vanguard party to lead them to socialism in its own good time, they will be unable to arrive at the new consciousness of themselves as a potential ruling class, and thus all their movements will inevitably be contained within the framework of capitalism.

This did not mean that Noel or the organization had abandoned the traditional conviction that the working class needed a Leninist party, although its notion of what such a party should look like was quite different from others.

From the start, the group's evolution was strongly influenced by its engagement with the ideas of C.L.R. James who was in Chicago for part of the time. That encounter was decisive in enabling those within the organization who had retained a sympathy for Stalinism (including Noel) to make a final break. In 1981, Noel devoted a special issue of *Urgent Tasks* to James's life and work. I'd suggest that every political project that Noel participated in from that moment on was infused with a Jamesian sensibility. His written words tell the story.

In the first issue of *Race Traitor*, Noel wrote in an editorial:

Race Traitor exists, not to make converts, but to reach out to those who are dissatisfied with the terms of membership in the white club. Its primary intended audience will be those people commonly called whites who, in one way or another, understand whiteness to be a problem that perpetuates injustice and prevents even the well-disposed among them from joining unequivocally in the struggle for human freedom. By engaging these dissidents in a journey of discovery into whiteness and its discontents, we hope to take part, together with others, in the process of defining a new human community.

Really, there are two questions—who are our readers and who are our writers? We imagine that both will be quite diverse. We expect to be read by educators, by clergy, by scholars, by parents, by teenagers—in short, by many people for whom the willingness to question their membership in the white club might be the only thing they hold in common. We anticipate that if we are successful, those individuals will come to have a great deal more in common.

You may wonder what kind of articles we want. We want to chronicle and analyze the making, re-making and unmaking of whiteness. We wish neither to minimize the complicity of even the most downtrodden of whites with the system of white supremacy nor to exaggerate the significance of momentary departures from white rules. We want to get it right.

We should say that there are some articles we are not interested in publishing. Since we are not seeking converts, we probably will not publish articles which lecture various organizations about their racial opportunism. Also, we probably will not publish articles promoting inter-racial harmony, because that approach too often leaves intact differential treatment of whites and blacks and provides subtle confirmation of the idea that different races exist independently of social distinctions.

A full set of the *Race Traitor* issues is available online.

In 2015, Noel and I wrote a bit of a post-mortem on *Race Traitor* as part of an essay on the Rachel Dolezal controversy. It was published in *Counterpunch*:

... we were interested in breaking up the white race to establish the basis for working class solidarity. Many years later, we continue to argue that the time-honored "Unite and Fight" approach will lead nowhere. Instead, when it comes to slogans, we prefer: "An injury to one is an injury to all," or, the same thing in a different idiom: "Remember them that are in bonds as bound with them." Solidarity premised on the reproduction of inequalities within the working class, with the elimination of those inequalities to come later in "the sweet by and by," is no solidarity at all.

In retrospect, we believe that RT provided a coherent framework for examining and discussing race. As we acknowledged in an essay published in our next-to-last issue, we could have and should have approached some things differently—perhaps especially about the relationship we saw between the abolition of whiteness and the possibility of an anti-capitalist revolution. But we believe that much of what we wrote remains valuable today.

We emphasized the cross-class character of the white race formation and repeatedly acknowledged that being in the white race did not exempt its working-class members from poverty or misery of all sorts. At the time, we pointed out that the privileges of membership were enough for almost all whites to want to remain members. More than twenty years on, whiteness is not what it used to be, but it ain't nothing.

We never used, endorsed or promoted identity politics; we railed against multiculturalism and diversity; we were scornful of those who wanted to preserve the “good aspects” of “white culture” or to rearticulate whiteness. We wanted nothing to do with the growing academic field of “whiteness studies.” We insisted that abolition was the goal of our words and our modest deeds.

Although we were often accused of bashing white people, we actually think that we had more confidence in them than many of those who rush to diminish white workers' responsibility for the perpetuation of racial oppression. We were partisans of the notion that new forms of consciousness can emerge from the working out of internal contradictions. While we agreed with David Roediger “that whiteness was not merely empty and false, it was nothing but empty and false,” we never thought that thinking of one's self as white was an all-consuming affair (other than for white supremacists and “white nationalists”). We knew perfectly well from our own experiences in families, schools, work places and political organizations and movements that whites also identified themselves in many other ways.

We never imagined that white and black were hermetically sealed realities or categories, and published more than a few articles that explored, and took quite different views on, various kinds of crossover phenomena. In that context, we articulated an appreciation for many elements of traditional African-American culture (which we do not regret to this day). An aspect of that traditional culture was the willingness of black communities to welcome white defectors. In spite of the wall between white and black, there have always been so-called whites, thousands of them (usually female), who married black partners, had children with them and lived in the black community (the only place they could live at the time)—without agonizing over their “identity.”

...

We did share some vocabulary with individuals and organizations that were travelling on different roads to different places. The most significant instance of this was the word “privilege.” In light of the political travesties that have developed under the term since, we wish we could have found some better way of differentiating ourselves from those who wanted to make careers (in journalism, social work, organizational development, education and the arts) by insisting that the psychic battle against privilege must be never-ending. The last thing in the world they wanted was for the white race to be abolished; if it were, they might have to make an honest living.

Our voice was never dominant. “Privilege politics” became a way of avoiding serious thought or political debate and a way of avoiding direct confrontations with the

institutions that reproduce race and with the individuals responsible for the functioning of those institutions. The focus shifted to an emphasis on scrutinizing every interpersonal encounter between black people and whites to unearth underlying racist attitudes and to guide people in “unlearning” them. This has developed into a tendency to strictly enforce the boundaries between the races—not only (as in the past) by white supremacists, but by proponents of what might be considered black advancement.

Unlike some who see privileges as prerogatives worth defending or rights that some workers have won through struggle and that other excluded workers should be provided, we insisted then and now that privileges are not rights. We assume that our views on that matter will be no more persuasive today to the unthinking troops of the sectarian left than they were 20 years ago.

At the present time, we acknowledge that the privileges have been eroded and that the protections once afforded to white people, and more specifically white workers, have become less significant than they were in the past. In that context, a constant hectoring of people about their privileges (which was never our approach) becomes an annoyance rather than a challenge. On the other hand, we would insist that something like race still matters a great deal—as is perhaps self-evident during a period of time characterized by a spate of police murders of black men and the murderous assault in the Charleston church. We would, however, urge people to look beneath the deeds that provoke immediate outrage from all sectors of society and appreciate the ways in which the everyday operations of institutions remain profoundly destructive of the well-being of African-Americans.

[...]

Although some may think that we are living and dreaming in a different world than the real one, we want to note that we know that Barack Obama was elected as the first black president and that the ranks of the rich and powerful, and even the “middle class,” now include a significant number of black people in positions previously reserved for whites.

While such individuals are still subject to slights and insults from many quarters, and Charleston shows that even prominent black clergymen and state senators can be the victims of attack by white supremacist terrorists, their lives are not defined by official repression in the way they were in the past or the way the lives of people in the poor districts on the south side of Chicago, West Baltimore, Brooklyn’s East New York/Brownsville or many other places are today.

It may be that race is again being redefined and that the degraded race will no longer be all those who share the characteristic of the visible black skin but only those who are poor and workers. Whatever its characteristics, the task of challenging those who enforce it will remain an essential one.

In late 2015, several *Race Traitor* supporters urged us to resume publication of the journal. After discussing the matter, we decided not to do so but to initiate a new publication, with some new collaborators, that would represent both continuity and a new beginning. In 2016, Noel penned the introductory editorial for *Hard Crackers*:

Attentiveness to daily lives is absolutely essential for those who would like to imagine how to act purposefully to change the world. During the 1940s and 1950’s *The New Yorker* ran a series of profiles by Joseph Mitchell of characters around New York.

Mitchell wrote, “The people in a number of the stories are of the kind that many writers have recently got in the habit of referring to as ‘the little people.’ I regard this phrase as patronizing and repulsive. There are no little people in this book. They are as big as you are, whoever you are.” The profiles are collected in *Up in the Old Hotel*. A reader will find there hardly a single “political” reference, yet there is no doubt that Mitchell and many of the people he wrote about would have happily adapted to life in an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.

Hard Crackers focuses on people like the ones Mitchell profiled. It does not seek to compete with publications that analyze world developments, nor with groups formed on the basis of things their members oppose and advocate; still less does it consider itself a substitute for political activity. It is guided by one principle: that in the ordinary people of this country (and the world) there resides the capacity to escape from the mess we are in, and a commitment to documenting and examining their strivings to do so.

“Hard Crackers” was a song popular among Union soldiers during the Civil War, a takeoff on Stephen Foster’s “Hard Times.” The Civil War and Reconstruction, viewed as a single event, was a revolution as great as any in human history, transforming property into strikers, soldiers, citizens, voters and legislators—a sequence unparalleled elsewhere. To get an idea of its radicalism, consider the following from Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address:

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

Has any statement ever captured more succinctly the meaning of revolution? The Lincoln who spoke those words was not the moderate who came to office four years earlier seeking to maintain the Union at almost any cost. Revolution is a process, not a single event, and millions, including Lincoln, were changed by it. Although the leaders of that revolution undoubtedly made mistakes and did not realize all their hopes, neither did they disgrace with their own deeds the cause for which they had fought, or leave a stench in the nostrils of later generations, as did many of the revolutionaries of the next century. *Hard Crackers* identifies with that history, and especially with the experience “on the ground” of those who made it (see <https://hardcrackers.com/about/>). [I should note that *Hard Crackers* publishes a print journal and regularly posts other comments on its web page.]

The last editorial Noel wrote for *Hard Crackers* appeared in the recently published Issue #7. He echoed familiar themes:

The crimes and atrocities committed by the United States through its history are surpassed by no other country. Nevertheless, the U.S. has repeatedly given rise to mass movements that have been models for the whole world. It is a paradox; consider the following, by C.L.R. James:

The unending murders, the destruction of peoples, the bestial passions, the sadism, the cruelties and the lusts, all the manifestations of barbarism of the last thirty years are unparalleled in history. But this barbarism exists only because nothing else can suppress the readiness for sacrifice, the democratic instincts and creative power of the great masses of the people.

The present occupant of the White House has managed to maintain his base notwithstanding his failure to fulfill the promises that led many to vote for him. In some cases his supporters oppose programs that can be demonstrated to benefit them materially, and support programs that will hurt them—suggesting that they are motivated by considerations other than purely material, including dignity—a fact which has a hopeful as well as an obvious down side. Some expect that his tariff wars with China and the resultant damage they do to the “economy” will at last awaken his working-class supporters to their true interests. We doubt it. It is our view that for many who are fed up with contemporary society, nothing less than a total change can win them away from him.

One of Noel’s favorite novels was Barry Unsworth’s masterful novel of sailor/slave revolt and utopian yearning, *Sacred Hunger* (1992). On board the slave ship, the young artist Delblanc, embarks on a campaign to persuade the miserable sailors that they could change the miserable world they inhabited:

Anyone at all—the weasel-faced Tapley, swabbing down the decks, a disgruntled Billy Blair coming up from scraping the slaves’ quarters, Morgan in his galley trying to find some new disguise for the rotten beef—might find himself addressed by Delblanc and asked whether he did not agree that the state of society was artificial and the power of one man over another merely derived from convention. Delblanc’s manner was the same with all, friendly and open. At first, tactics lagging behind conviction, he made no concessions to any imperfections of understanding in his audience. “By nature, we are equal,” he said on one occasion to a vacantly smiling Calley. “Does it not therefore follow that government must always depend on the consent of the governed?” He even spoke to McGann, asking him whether he did not think it true that the character of man originated in external circumstances and could be changed as these were changed.

The men listened, or appeared to listen, out of deference, because he was a gentleman, because he was paying for his passage. Delblanc saw soon enough that he was using the wrong language with them and was beginning to try out a different one until warned by Thurso [the captain] that if he persisted in distracting the crew, he would be confined to his quarters for the rest of the voyage. ... One look at the captain’s face was enough to convince Delblanc. It was in his reaction to this threat that he showed the quick grasp of realities that later came to distinguish him. A man can do no good locked up in his cabin. He went more circumspectly thereafter.

For me, Unsworth’s portrait of Delblanc has always seemed to capture something of the essential revolutionary passion and determination of my friend, of over 40 years, Noel Ignatiev.