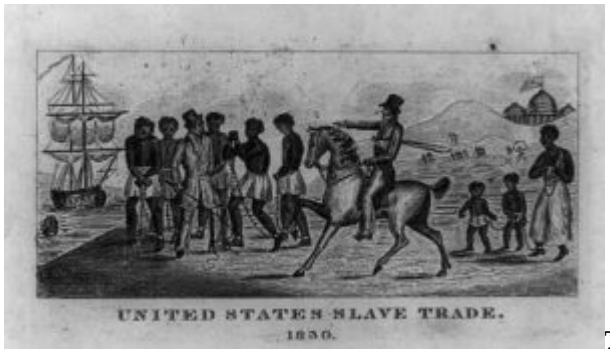
Racism and Capitalism

written by Phil Gasper | December 8, 2020



The Reed debate

Debates about the relationship between race and class, racism and capitalism, have been with us for as long as there's been a socialist movement. In the past few years they have surfaced in and around the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), particularly focused on the controversial writings of Adolph Reed. Reed was scheduled to give a talk sponsored by DSA's Philadelphia and Lower Manhattan branches in late May, but he canceled his appearance after facing criticism from DSA's Afrosocialists and Socialists of Color Caucus.

Reed is a distinguished African-American, left-wing political scientist, who has often had valuable things to say. But he's always relished being a contrarian and I think that he, and a number of people influenced by him, have gone badly off the rails in their recent writing on race and class. They start from the same place that I start from, that we need a class analysis of racism, but from this they draw a series of mistaken conclusions.

First, they argue that if we have a class analysis, then we can explain racial inequality mainly in terms of class inequality and pay less attention to race. In an article in *Catalyst* last year, two of Reed's co-thinkers argued that mass incarceration isn't a product of racism. Reed published an article on *Common Dreams* in April arguing that racial inequality in health outcomes is due to underlying class inequalities and that to draw attention to the fact that "blacks have it worse" is to open the door to racist pseudo science.

Second, they conclude from this that socialists should focus on universal class demands—like Medicare for All—not on specifically anti-racist demands. Reed for instance, has been hostile to the Black Lives Matter movement and to the call for reparations. In fact, Reed argues that antiracism is counterproductive. He writes "because racism is not the principal source of inequality today, anti-racism functions more as a misdirection that justifies inequality than a strategy for eliminating it." Elsewhere he claims that anti-racism gives cover to neoliberal identity politics, which elevates a few Blacks, women, gays, etc. to prominent positions, but which doesn't challenge underlying inequalities.

Reed's critics accuse him of class reductionism. He rejects the term, but I think it fits. He, in turn, accuses his critics of being race reductionists, who want to explain inequality in terms of race rather than class. There are no doubt some people who are race reductionists, but I don't think that is the position of most of Reed's left-wing critics. We critics agree that we need a class perspective, but we think that race and class are intertwined in much more complex ways than Reed allows.

History

To explain what those ways are, we have to discuss the history of capitalism and its relationship to racism. My view is that capitalism created racism. That's a controversial view—not everyone on the left, let alone in the mainstream, agrees—and I can't give it a detailed defense in a short article, but I will point to one very important piece of evidence in its favor. The concept of race didn't exist before the late 14th century. You won't find it in ancient writings—in the Bible or Herodotus—it's not even in Marco Polo's diaries written in the 13th century. Its emergence coincides with the start of the modern African slave trade, and it was used to justify it.

As the Black historian Eric Williams argued in his classic study *Capitalism and Slavery*, racism doesn't explain slavery, slavery explains racism. The slave trade was, of course, vital to the development of capitalism. In the 16th century, enslaved Africans were used to extract wealth from the New World that was essential to the primitive accumulation of capital in western Europe.

So, racism was absolutely central to the regime of labor relations that allowed capitalism to develop. But it also played a variety of other key roles. Almost immediately, ruling elites recognized its value as a divide-and-rule strategy.

In capitalism, like all class societies, a minority monopolizes most wealth and power. How can a small minority maintain its dominance over the vast majority? It will use open repression whenever necessary, but it's hard to run a society just on repression, so ruling classes need to find ways to stop the majority from organizing together. Racism has played this role, especially in North America, since at least the 17th century.

Starting with Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia in 1676, there were significant uprisings in the American colonies, with poor whites and enslaved Blacks often joining forces to fight against their masters. Ruling elites responded by passing slave codes to discipline Blacks, while giving small privileges to poor whites. According to the historian Theodore Allen, this amounted to "the invention of the white race."

Allen conducted a detailed survey of 17th century records and concluded: "I have found no instance of the official use of the word 'white' as a token of social status before its appearance in a Virginia law passed in 1691." Soon afterwards the Virginia Assembly proclaimed that all white men were superior to Blacks and passed a law requiring masters to provide white servants whose indenture time was up with money, supplies and land.

Such measures kept poor whites as well as Blacks subordinated to their masters. As Frederick Douglass later put it, "They divided both to conquer each." This is why racism survived the end of slavery and persisted both as a method of justifying continued racial inequality—embedded in the labor market, housing, education, healthcare, and every other area of society—and as the most effective divide-and-conquer strategy available to the ruling class.

And racism also continued to play an important role in the justifications offered for colonial and imperial wars and conquest, which remain another central feature of capitalism.

This raises an interesting question—could capitalism exist without racism? I'll answer that question in two ways. First, racism is thoroughly embedded and integrated in the capitalism we actually have. In order to end racism, we would have to dismantle the economic system that it is part of—not least because ending racism will require an enormous redistribution of wealth and power.

Second, at a more abstract level, we can ask whether in different historical circumstances,

capitalism could have emerged without racism. I'm willing to entertain that possibility. However (and this is a big "however"), I don't believe that capitalism could have emerged without some other, functionally equivalent, brutal system of oppression.

Capitalism is a system of economic exploitation, but it's a system that can't operate without methods of dividing the mass of the population using harsh systems of oppression. And, of course, in our society, race is not the only basis for oppression—we have sexism, homophobia, nationalism, ableism, and many other forms of oppression. Perhaps capitalism without racism is a theoretical possibility, but capitalism without oppression is not.

Practical conclusions

Finally, what practical conclusions should we draw?

Because capitalism and racism are intertwined, and because of the role that racism plays in dividing the working class, if we want to fight against capitalism and class inequality, anti-racism has to be at the center of our activity.

It's not enough, as Reed and his supporters propose, to raise universal class demands. One of the things that makes it difficult to win such demands is racism. For example, one of the reasons why social benefits are so much worse in the United States than in other developed capitalist countries, is because racism is so strong here. The standard way of opposing government programs to provide welfare or healthcare, is to portray them as handouts to undeserving people of color. Even though most whites would benefit enormously from such programs, this trick has been enormously effective.

There is absolutely no reason to see anti-racist struggles as a diversion. They are vital if we want to build the kind of class unity necessary to take on the whole system. And it is worth adding that there is no sharp boundary between struggles for racial justice and fights for broader class demands. The experience and victories of the former, can—and often have—laid the basis for the latter. To mention just one example, many of the militants who led the upsurge in labor militancy at the end of the 1960s—including the successful postal workers' national wildcat strike 50 years ago in 1970—were veterans of the civil rights movement and the black liberation struggle (and also the anti-war movement, the women's movement, the gay liberation movement, and so on).

The fight against racism is not a diversion or an optional extra. It's a key component of the fight for socialism.

This article is based on a talk given to the Madison-Area DSA in October.