

Why Does Racism Survive?

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In a short article entitled “Racism and Capitalism” that was published on the *New Politics* website on December 8 of last year, Phil Gasper wrote:

“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.”

Phil is open to the suggestion that capitalism without racism is a plausible theoretical conceit, but insofar as American (and European) capitalism was intimately linked to African slavery, racism arose as a self-justifying bridging ideology. Otherwise, the tension between the Enlightenment assertion of human equality, which the bourgeois revolutions so proudly championed against feudalism, and the racial subordination of one section of humanity which capitalism practiced, could not otherwise be rationalized. Notions of racial superiority were materially rooted in an “actually existing” but historically transient capitalist hybrid with chattel slavery. Fair enough.

But the question then arises, why does this anachronistic ideology survive, and even at times such as these, seemingly flourish? Obviously, the institutions of slavery no longer nourish racism. What then is its wavelike revival rooted in? According to Phil, if I understand his argument properly, it is foisted on society, or periodically resuscitated, from the top as a sort of divide-and-conquer strategy by capitalists to keep the masses from coalescing around a united program of opposition.

Yet, I find this unconvincing on two grounds. First, capitalism has methods embedded in the very warp and woof of exploitation that very effectively inculcate the habits of submission: the struggle between the employed and the unemployed for jobs, between the skilled and the unskilled for pay; the ongoing process of deskilling which disempowers; automation; speedups; outsourcing; gig work ... In a phrase, capitalists purchase working class capitulation through their perpetuation of sweeping economic and social insecurities, an exhausting and exhaustingly frustrating hamster wheel, that keeps capitalist abundance just beyond reach.

What need, therefore, do bosses have for these other forms of oppression that pit worker against worker and that portend a potential disruption of workflow? And if they do need them, it seems somewhat odd that corporations invest so much time and effort into HR departments to pacify work floors through affirmative action, diversity training, and other forms of policing the environment against racial (and sexist, etc) intimidation. For the same reason that capitalists oppose the disorderliness of unions, they also abhor a workplace environment where toxic internecine divisions threaten the collaborative ability of employees to maximize the bottom line.

Instilling the habits of obedience therefore also necessitates forcing diverse working-class populations to suppress their prejudices and animosities during the work day and recruits an activist management to the task of isolating and weeding out those who cannot so discipline themselves.

Why, then, does the suppression of racism in the heavily policed workplace erupt so wantonly in political spaces?

This brings up my second objection. It is not capitalists that promote racism (except for the most troglodyte of hangovers, most pride themselves and not totally hypocritically for their “enlightened” and “liberal” social leanings, virtues that cost them nothing), but the capitalist system itself. The system, based on perpetuating scarcity in the midst of unparalleled abundance, cannot help but do so. Far from being a ruling class initiative, white chauvinism arises from below as an imminent, instinctive group strategy to leverage favored access to jobs, security and scarce public goods through exclusion. This is the unfortunate truth that socialists are often loath to face and which cannot be reconciled in the context of Phil’s approach.

This has manifold implications, part of which is relevant to the debate over Adolph Reed’s contributions. The first is that racism cannot be simply reduced, as it often is, to prejudice wedded to power without qualifying what “power” means. The power of white workers resides in their numbers and their social weight in the economy, but not in their wealth and alleged privilege. Racism is a survival strategy, a social-Darwinistic identity politics, of the disunited jockeying for position in the context of class fragmentation. It is a reactionary alternative that arises in the absence of militant class struggle politics. Those with actual wealth and privilege have no direct material stake in racism. They can afford the woke pretense of floating above the fray and giddily indulge themselves with guilt-tripping taunts against their morally inferior white lessers.

But this also suggests where an overreliance on an alternative, progressive, “identity politics” of the excluded and marginalized can open reactionary possibilities. It is, of course, the god-given right of those who are attacked for their identity to defend their rights and dignity based on that self-same identity. It is not only their right; it is their duty.

But when those who are the objects of racism seek to rebalance their power disadvantage from below in alliance with the woke sections of the ruling class (eg Ford Foundation and myriad others), the jockeying see-saw of the exploited and oppressed is perpetuated. From the perspective of the excluded, any advance that this top-down alliance effectuates is undoubtedly a social advance.

But it is a lesser-evil setback for socialism, and of working-class unity. It keeps the underlying dynamics that give rise to racist working divisions alive.

I think this is the larger significance and heart of Reed’s contribution.