

Race, Class and Justice in America

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I am gratified to honor another invitation from the Detroit Unitarian Universalist Church where I have spoken before from this pulpit and other areas of this historic structure. It is important that this institution remains within this area now known as Midtown as a beacon of solidarity with an open door to those who have ideas and personal instincts that challenge the dominant intellectual and spiritual cannons that have shaped the United States and world over the last several centuries.

Our topic today addresses three of the most important unresolved questions of the 21st century where we find ourselves in a global community with the capacity to rapidly and effectively communicate and influence those around the world. Despite our technological achievements in the ability to generate, calculate, analyze, disseminate, and file data the world system of capitalism has failed to provide an adequate standard of living to the majority of humanity.



Right here in the city of Detroit people are being driven out through state-sponsored efforts utilizing the tax revenue of working families to evict and displace those who are literally paying for their own oppression and exploitation. Thousands more households remain without water due to the egregious cut-offs—and in the case of Flint, the water is not fit to drink.

Although there have been nine indictments related to the Flint water crisis and a civil suit filed by the Michigan Attorney General's office in Lansing, no real effort is being made to rebuild the majority African American city as a wholesome and safe place to live and work. Now a situation has arose over the disposal of trash compounding the social ills related to lead poisoning in children, legionnaire's disease, skin problems and inflated water bills for an unclean product.

How can the treatment of people in major metropolitan industrial and service-centered areas be allowed to deteriorate to such a degree without high level officials being held accountable by fellow politicians and the courts? Where does the federal government step in to ostensibly protect the "civil rights" of ordinary residents from the tyranny of their local governments and private corporations? The wealthiest people within society are excused from paying adequate taxes and are allowed to expropriate the working people and poor, many of whom are Black and Brown.

W.E.B. Du Bois on Race as a Social Construct

Race as a biological construct has been largely discredited by modern historians, social scientists, evolutionary biologists and geneticists. Nonetheless, there have been so-called “scholars” who have suggested that African people are inherently inferior to Europeans.

These pseudo-scientific and racist academic arguments are advanced utilizing the tools of the research academies without providing adequate controls or acknowledgements of the socio-historical circumstances surrounding the nationally oppressed communities in the U.S. By attributing a biological basis for performance, integration and the supposed lack thereof, in actuality provides a rationale for the maintenance and even the reinforcement of the social status quo in America.

In fact these arguments of African inferiority were utilized to justify the enslavement of millions of people within North America as well as throughout the western hemisphere, Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The belief that Europeans only have something to offer the peoples of the oppressed world and nothing to learn from them is not a view based upon historical assessment but one rooted in colonial and imperialist thought processes.

Although historians of western civilization trace its antecedents back to ancient Greece they fail to cite the writing of many of the historians and philosophers such as Herodotus who wrote a firsthand account on his travels to Egypt in the fifth century B.C. Herodotus’ observations are at variance with the notions of an uncivilized and inferior people. Of course many western historians have claimed in the past that Herodotus was a storyteller, however, he was not the only one who wrote of the ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians in such glowing terms.

Arthur Jensen in his February 1969 article in the Harvard Educational Review suggested that African Americans based upon their general performance on IQ test had lower capacity for learning than did whites. One must keep in mind that this theory generated much controversy and came about during a period of militant mass struggle against racism by the African American people.

Another ideological and pseudo-scientific racist William Shockley who did work on the transistors in the 1950s also advanced similar views on African American genetic inferiority. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), “Despite having no training whatsoever in genetics, biology or psychology, Shockley devoted the last decades of his life to a quixotic struggle to prove that black Americans were suffering from “dysgenesis,” or “retrogressive evolution,” and advocated replacing the welfare system with a “Voluntary Sterilization Bonus Plan,” which, as its name suggests, would pay low-IQ women to undergo sterilization. Although his theories were universally condemned by biologists as racist pseudoscience, Shockley partly succeeded in rehabilitating eugenics as an ideology by providing the foundations for a new, more politically savvy generation of academic racists, including Arthur Jensen, Richard Lynn and Charles Murray.”

This same SPLC website notes: “William Shockley’s importance in the development of modern electronics cannot be overstated. While working at Bell Labs during the 1940s and 50s, Shockley led the team that invented the transistor, for which he and his collaborators won numerous prizes and awards. In 1965, however, Shockley’s career took an abrupt turn from internationally famous physicist to a racist crank when he gave an address at a Nobel conference on ‘Genetics and the Future of Man.’ In his lecture, Shockley warned of the

threat of 'genetic deterioration' and 'evolution in reverse,' problems exacerbated, he claimed, by the Great Society welfare programs that allowed the less genetically fit to reproduce at will, free from the constraints of natural selection."

Just within the last two decades another book written under the cloak of academic legitimacy entitled "The Bell Curve" is described as follows by the intelltheory.com website saying: "The Bell Curve, published in 1994, was written by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray as a work designed to explain, using empirical statistical analysis, the variations in intelligence in American Society, raised some warnings regarding the consequences of this intelligence gap, and propose national social policy with the goal of mitigating the worst of the consequences attributed to this intelligence gap. Many of the assertions put forth and conclusions reached by the authors are very controversial, ranging from the relationships between low measured intelligence and anti-social behavior, to the observed relationship between low African-American test scores (compared to whites and Asians) and genetic factors in intelligence abilities. The book was released and received with a large public response. In the first several months of its release, 400,000 copies of the book were sold around the world. Several thousand reviews and commentaries have been written in the short time since the book's publication. "

One African American historian and social scientist, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, a Harvard graduate in 1896, wrote his doctoral dissertation on "The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870." Some seven years later in his work entitled "Souls of Black Folk", he foresaw the role of racism within the global oppressive system over the course of the 20th century.

Du Bois said in chapter two of this book that: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. It was a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War; and however much they who marched South and North in 1861 may have fixed on the technical points, of union and local autonomy as a shibboleth, all nevertheless knew, as we know, that the question of Negro slavery was the real cause of the conflict. Curious it was, too, how this deeper question ever forced itself to the surface despite effort and disclaimer. No

sooner had Northern armies touched Southern soil than this old question, newly guised,

sprang from the earth. What shall be done with Negroes? Peremptory military commands this way and that, could not answer the query; the Emancipation Proclamation seemed but to broaden and intensify the difficulties; and the War Amendments made the Negro problems of today." (1903)

I would venture to say that the problem of racism and racial domination continues into the second decade of the 21st century. The disproportionate rates of police killings, vigilante violence and incarceration are a reflection of systematic racial profiling and a culture of impunity directed towards African Americans.

Dr. Du Bois later wrote in another classic work entitled "Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward A History Of The Part Which Black Folk Played In The Attempt To Reconstruct Democracy In America, 1860-1880", on the economic imperatives of the racial enslavement and colonization of the African people, that: "The giant forces of water and of steam were

harnessed to do the world's work, and the black workers of America bent at the bottom of a growing pyramid of commerce and industry; and they not only could not be spared, if this new economic organization was to expand, but rather they became the cause of new political demands and alignments, of new dreams of power and visions of empire. First of all, their work called for widening stretches of new, rich, black soil — in Florida, in Louisiana, in Mexico; even in Kansas. This land, added to cheap labor, and labor easily regulated and distributed, made profits so high that a whole system of culture arose in the South, with a new leisure and social philosophy. Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor, and a new labor problem, involving all white labor, arose both in Europe and America." (Introduction, 1935)

This same author continues saying: "Thus, the old difficulties and paradoxes appeared in new dress. It became easy to say and easier to prove that these black men (or women) were not men (or women) in the sense that white men were, and could never be, in the same sense, free. Their slavery was a matter of both race and social condition, but the condition was limited and determined by race. They were congenital wards and children, to be well-treated and cared for, but far happier and safer here than in their own land."

Unfortunately, these same ideas are very much in evidence today in the second decade of the 21st century. Such thinking reaffirms discrimination and racism suggesting that the African people deserve the oppression and exploitation that they are subjected to on a daily basis. Claiming that African American communities are the primary sources of criminality then therefore these already oppressed areas deserve to be occupied by the police.

Moreover, the failure of the local, state and federal governmental structures to address these issues is an even greater crime. The votes of the African American people directed towards the Democratic Party for all intents and purposes mean nothing. Beyond the symbolism of the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia where many African Americans served as delegates and spoke from the rostrum, what they carried away back to their home areas in all likelihood will not amount to much in the way of political capital let alone financial resources.

These factors within the context of the broader political landscape, guides us into the second area of concern for our discussion today. How does race and class merge into a system of national discrimination and economic exploitation?

Class Domination and Racial Unrest

For nearly two centuries and a-half the African people in North America were subjected to British, French, Spanish and American slavery and colonialism. Even with the much heralded War of Independence from 1776-1783, African people remained enslaved by the newly-formed United States of America. Was this a real revolution or a counter-revolution against the gradual dissolution of the British slave system in Europe and the possibility of it extending into colonies of North America and the Caribbean?

Gerald Horne, an African American historian, asserts in his book "The Counter-Revolution of 1776" emphasizing that: "Exactly, many of whom—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Madison, Patrick Henry—were all slave owners. Even a future U.S. president, who was not necessarily involved in slavery, John Adams, was a lawyer for slave owners. John Hancock,

whose name appears on the founding document, was one of the key slaveholders in Massachusetts, for example. You have to realize that slavery was not a sideshow. There's evidence to suggest that slave voyages and slavery itself was one of the most lucrative enterprises ever devised in the brain of human beings, sometimes profits of 1,700 percent. As you know living in North America there are those today within a stone's throw of the studio who would sell their firstborn for a profit of 1,700 percent, let alone an African they did not know." (Real News Network Interview, 2014)

Horne also says: "Well, U.S. historians today generally argue that despite these, quote, problems you've just articulated, slavery remained profitable up to the time it was abolished in the United States in 1865. And an entire superstructure had developed to justify slavery. What I mean is the ideology that Africans were inferior, that if Africans weren't enslaved, they would butcher each other."

It would take another ninety years after the consolidation of the victory by the Americans over the British to end slavery in the U.S. There was a Civil War during 1861-65, one of the bloodiest encounters on U.S. soil, to end legalized human trafficking and bondage. The Civil War cannot be viewed separately from the two centuries of African resistance to slavery. In the 19th century alone, the impact of the Haitian Revolution of 1804; Gabriel insurrection plot of 1800; influenced by the Haitian Revolution; as was the rebellion along the German coast near New Orleans in 1811; the alleged African Methodist Episcopal church-based conspiracy organized by Denmark Vesey in Charleston South Carolina in 1822; the Nat Turner revolt of Southampton County Virginia of 1831; along with John Brown and his comrades' raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia in 1859, often considered the opening shots of the Civil War, played a pivotal role in the ultimate battles that, although not necessarily intending to do so, resulted in the destruction of slavery as a profitable economic system.

Nonetheless, it would take another century after 1865 for the failed process of Reconstruction to re-emerge during the late 1950s into the 1960s. Even with the passage of a series of Civil Rights Bills from 1957 to 1968, a white backlash to the struggle for equality and self-determination would place obstacles in the path of the African American people aimed at total liberation.

The system of class domination would continue although taking on a different character beginning in the 1970s. A restructuring of the world capitalist system after 1975 eliminated millions of jobs, African American owned businesses, homes and communities. The impact of these developments served to reinforced class domination, racial polarization and isolation along with political disempowerment.

In recent years the Great Recession, the worst economic downturn since the Depression of the 1930s, had a tremendous negative impact on the African American people. We have seen this clearly in the city of Detroit where we once had the largest home-ownership rate among African American and working class people in the U.S. Many of our communities have been systematically destroyed and there is no official plan for their restoration or remaking.

I for one do not believe that these communities can be rebuilt from the top down by people who do not have our interests in mind. Their plans do not include us in any systematic program of revitalization and resurgence.

The city of Detroit has one of the highest rates of concentrated poverty in the country. In a review of a research report published earlier this year, the Detroit Free Press wrote in April

citing: "A study recently released by the Brookings Institution says that metro Detroit has the highest rate of concentrated poverty among the top 25 metro areas in the U.S. by population. In the six-county region (Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Livingston, St. Clair, Lapeer), 32% of the poor live in census tracts where at least 40% of the population is below the federal poverty line, according to an analysis of 2010-2014 census figures by researchers at Brookings, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. In 2000, only 9% of the poor in metro Detroit lived in census tracts with a high concentration of poverty, ranking the region 10th among the top 25 metro areas. Now, metro Detroit has the highest at 32%, more than twice the rate of areas like metro Chicago, Houston and the national average of 13.5%."

Many of the so-called "development" projects and "new investment" are not geared towards empowering the working class and poor. These efforts are self-serving for the rich and their surrogates within the corporate and state structures.

For example, the building of stadia has been documented not to improve the overall conditions of downtown areas let alone the underdeveloped neighborhoods many of which are populated by African Americans and Latinos. Since the construction of Ford Field and Comerica Park since the late 1990s, the conditions of the majority African American community has worsened. Although promises were made that these prestige modern landmarks would generate peripheral employment and small business opportunities, these realizations have proven non-existent.

Later during the 1990s, there was the opening of three casino hotels also said to be the solution to the problems of economic decline. There would be not only thousands of jobs but abundant tax revenues that could provide better municipal services and educational resources.

However, the much trumpeted tax revenues from the casinos became a major focus of contention during the illegally-imposed bankruptcy of 2013-14, the largest in U.S. municipal history. After all was said and done, the tax capturing trustees were awarded land and other assets to settle with the federal court while tens of thousands of retirees, employees and their families were robbed of billions in pension and healthcare benefits.

Moreover, paralleling the opening of the stadia in downtown Detroit and the casino hotels were two other not unrelated events. In 1999, the State of Michigan with legislative and local governmental approval took over the Detroit Public Schools under the false claims of a fiscal emergency. This decision proved to be an unmitigated disaster prefiguring a precipitous decline within public education and its concomitant negative consequences.

This "state control" and destruction of DPS continued for more than five years when an elected board dominated by corporate interests took control continuing the process of looting the system resulting in the lowering of performance. Scores of schools were closed between the years of 1999-2009, when a so-called "emergency manager" was appointed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm.

After 2009, the situation worsened with the shuttering of even more schools, over 200, aggravating the problems of blight and abandonment in the city. A number of the buildings closed were high-performing schools that served as stabilizing factors in the communities. When schools close parents and others often move since the impact on the neighborhoods exacerbates existing difficulties.

These measures taken against the DPS are justified by using racist assumptions and accusations saying that the administrators and elected officials running the system are corrupt and inefficient. However, those who come to “administer” the system under the guise of “improvement” using corporate models of governance, expropriate far more resources than the petty-bourgeois interests could ever carry out. These imposed elements have the full backing of the capitalist system and the federal government. These crimes are often rationalized by the business media which serves as cheerleaders for the further draining of the system.

Also during the late 1990s, the bank-engineered predatory lending schemes drove hundreds of thousands out of Detroit. The city lost a quarter of its population, over 235, 000, during the course of the last census period of 2000-2010. These financial plans were carried out with the full backing of local, state and federal governmental structures.

Where are these issues to be addressed within American officialdom? With the national conventions of two major parties held last month, there was no discussion of these critical factors related to the African American condition. Yet one party in particular will focus its attention on the African American people for votes in November without offering any real solutions to the problems plaguing our communities across the U.S.

The Democratic Party represents the same ruling class interests as the Republicans. It was the Clinton campaign that came under scrutiny for its close ties to Wall Street. The outgoing administration of President Barack Obama supported and later implemented the bailout of the banks absent of any real effort to repair the damage done to working class and so-called middle classes during the Great Recession. I say supposed middle class because many of those who thought they were somewhat privileged soon discovered that they were not. Tragically for us, the capitalists understand class struggle to a greater degree than the workers and oppressed. They are waging constant warfare against the people on a multifaceted level from both domestic and foreign policy directions.

The wars of regime-change and occupation are racist and imperialist in their character. It has largely been the peoples of the Middle East, Africa, the Asia-Pacific and Latin America who have borne the brunt of these militarist policies fostered by successive Republican and Democratic administration. It was the Obama administration, with Clinton serving as secretary of state, which destroyed the North African state of Libya. The oil-rich country under the Jamahiriya system headed by Col. Muammar Gaddafi, had achieved the status of being the most prosperous nation on the continent. Gaddafi had served as the chairman of the continental-wide African Union (AU) in 2009. The political foundation for the transformation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), founded in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1963, to the AU was laid down in Sirte, Libya at an OAU meeting in 1999.

Therefore, our struggle is not just a local one. It takes on global dimensions in the sense that the resources which should be utilized to improve the conditions of our communities are being squandered in these military adventures. Our young people are returning from these unjust wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and other geo-political areas as broken human being. Thousands have died and been wounded. Hundreds of thousands are suffering from wounds both physical and psychological. Many are inflicted with closed head injuries and what is often generally described as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Nevertheless, the Veteran Administration (VA) has failed to provide the healthcare and social services needed for the re-integration of these people back into an American society

where joblessness and poverty are widespread. Disproportionately these youth are from nationally oppressed, working class, immigrant and poor communities, whom can hardly afford to be further exploited through the lies and false premises that guide the Pentagon and White House in their continuing mad rush to war.

American Justice and Social Transformation

Perhaps the most blatant form of national oppression has been illustrated through the accelerated rate of police killings against African Americans. Overall, over 1000 people were killed during 2015 by law-enforcement agents. A disproportionate amount of these victims were from the African American communities.

I wrote in an article at the beginning of this year noting: "The U.S. political and economic system is rooted in racist violence and state repression aimed at maintaining the status-quo of racial capitalism. Consequently, the burgeoning movement to halt the use of lethal force will have to address this history as part of the contemporary struggle for its abolition. As the economic fabric of capitalism and its state structures experience deeper crises, the level of violence and repression will escalate. A greater emphasis has been placed on blocking retail outlets and refraining from any form of conspicuous consumption on the part of the oppressed, attacking the base of the system which is built on the exploitation of the majority of working people and African Americans as a whole." (Global Research, Jan. 5)

Reinforcing the use of lethal force, the prison industrial complex contains over 2.5 million people in the U.S., the largest per capita incarceration rate in the world. African Americans and Latinos are disproportionately held in penal institutions and subjected to law-enforcement and judicial supervision. On a broader level most people sitting and working as slaves in correctional facilities come from the working class and poor populations.

As far as I know there are no millionaires and billionaires on death row. Despite crimes committed by the banks and the industrial firms against African Americans and working class people in general through the theft of jobs, homes, economic opportunities and political rights, none have been held legally accountable.

Both major political parties offer no program for the closing of the prisons and jails. We know from history that successive administrations since the 1980s, both Democratic and Republican, have fostered the exponential growth in mass incarceration at a rate of 500 percent. Under the Clinton administration during the 1990s, the president signed the ominous crime bill; the effective death penalty act among other measures that impose mandatory minimum sentencing; denying employment opportunities and federally subsidized housing to ex-felons; fueling recidivism; and the consequent social control of the African American people.

One of the founding members of the Black Lives Matter hashtag and movement, Alicia Garza, said of the current race for the White House, that "the Clintons use the Black community as a way to garner more votes. Alicia Garza discussed the Black Lives Matter movement and 'systematic racism' in America with Bloomberg Businessweek. In her interview, she claimed that Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton does not back up her claims that she cares for the Black community. Garza said that the Clintons routinely use the Black community for their own benefit. 'The Clintons use Black people for votes, but then don't do anything for Black communities after they're elected. They use us for photo ops,' Garza said." (Bloomberg, Aug. 4)

Continuing in the interview, “Garza also had words for former President Bill Clinton, who she said angered her over a comment he made to black protesters. During a campaign event for Hillary Clinton, Black Lives Matter protesters interrupted Clinton’s event. Bill Clinton told the protesters that they were ‘defending the people who kill the lives you say matter.’ ‘I was angry about that for about a month—seriously, like every single day. It’s reprehensible for him to defend the impacts his policies have had on our communities,’ Garza told Bloomberg Businessweek. Garza also declared that despite Clinton’s claims that ‘Black lives matter,’ she has participated in processes that had a negative effect on Black people. Early on, she would say, ‘Yes, Black lives matter,’ but she wouldn’t acknowledge her role in processes that fundamentally showed Black lives did not matter. She says that she is for economic justice, but she doesn’t support \$15 an hour as the minimum wage,’ Garza told Bloomberg Businessweek.

Towards the end of the interview, Garza declared that the Black community is not ‘indebted’ to the Democratic Party in any way.”

The Way Forward Towards Total Liberation

Therefore I believe that the path to African American liberation is through independent mass organization and mobilization. How many times are we to be subjected to the lies and broken promises of the bipolar political party system in the U.S.? What do we get for our votes and tax dollars: more repression, poverty and political disempowerment?

The changing character of the world system requires new approaches to politics that proceed from the ground up and not vice versa. As long as we wait for the wealthy and their surrogates to bring about our freedom we will remain in neo-slavery and neo-colonialism.

Independent politics and organization requires new thinking. It demands full participation of the most impacted and oppressed as the leadership of the struggle. Absent of these essential ingredients we cannot move forward beyond the contemporary political impasse.

Let us begin a process of renewal and regeneration of ideas and work processes where we take responsibility for the liberation from oppression and economic exploitation. We need this to become a reality and this line of march can ensure that we take control of both our present and the future.

Note: This address was delivered in part before the congregation and guests at the Detroit Unitarian Universalist Church on Sunday August 7, 2016. Azikiwe was the featured speaker at the morning services held at the church located in the Midtown area of the city.

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