

The Social Roots of Racism in America

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On Monday, President Barack Obama used a podcast interview to argue that racism is in “the DNA” of Americans. In the course of his discussion with comedian Marc Maron, Obama declared, “The legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, discrimination in almost every institution of our lives, you know, that casts a long shadow, and that’s still part of our DNA that’s passed on.”

Obama’s use of the term “DNA,” even if intended as a somewhat poorly chosen metaphor, serves definite political purposes. It facilitates the attempt to present racism as essentially a biological phenomenon—a conception that, like all racist thinking, is unscientific and reactionary.

The president’s remarks coincide with an escalating campaign in the media to use last week’s tragic shooting in Charleston, South Carolina to filter every question of American society through the prism of race, outside of any social, economic or historical context. The *New York Times*, in particular, has devoted a significant portion of its opinion pages to polemics on the nature of “whiteness” and “blackness” and the supposedly unbridgeable racial divide in America.

Historically, the conception that racism is rooted in the actual makeup of different races found its most consistent and reactionary exponents among those who proclaimed that blacks were inherently inferior to whites. The Nazis in Germany employed crackpot arguments about a biologically determined divide to justify their program of mass relocation and extermination. Racism and racist policies were explained and rationalized on the basis of the fundamental differences between the races themselves.

Socialists reject these conceptions. Racism exists, and has existed, in the United States. It has, not infrequently, taken horrific forms: bombings, lynchings, segregation. Yet racism can be understood only within its actual social context, as a distorted expression of class relations and social interests.

American racism had its origins in the slave system. The racism of the Old South served the interests of the slave owners in justifying, through the lie of racial inferiority, their own cruel and shameless exploitation of the socioeconomic system upon which the southern plantation aristocracy was based.

The slave-owning class was crushed through a massive social mobilization in the form of the American Civil War, in which, supposed genetic coding aside, 300,000 white people in the North set out to “die to make men free,” in the words of the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

The decades following the Civil War saw economic development at a dizzying pace, including the massive expansion of cities and industrialization on a hitherto unknown scale.

These processes came together with the growth of the workers' movement and militant strikes. Many of those who had led the fight against slavery—the great abolitionist Wendell Phillips is one example—became active in the labor movement.

In the South, where sharecropping replaced slavery, the last two decades of the 19th century saw the emergence of populist movements that drew the support of millions of agricultural workers, white and black.

It was under these conditions that legal segregation was enshrined by the Supreme Court (in the 1896 case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*) and racist violence was actively encouraged and promoted. The Ku Klux Klan had as its goal not only the terrorizing of blacks, but—inextricably tied to this—the defeat of all efforts to unify black and white workers on the basis of their common class interests.

The social progress of African-Americans in the subsequent period would have been impossible without the workers' movement, including the Russian Revolution and the great industrial struggles of the 1930s and subsequent decades.

In the first decades of the 20th century, the socialist-minded workers and intellectuals who spearheaded the organization of the industrial unions courageously fought against the racism that was encouraged by the corporations and the old AFL craft unions. However, these efforts, particularly in the South, were compromised by the unions' political alliance with the Democratic Party, at that time the party of segregation and white supremacy.

In the 1960s, the deepening crisis of American capitalism exploded in the civil rights movement, the ghetto rebellions, a wave of militant strikes, and the mass movement against the Vietnam War.

The response of the ruling class to these upheavals was to once again turn to the promotion of race as the fundamental category in American society. This was accompanied by the elevation into positions of power and privilege of a section of the African-American population through race-based policies such as Affirmative Action. African-Americans became CEOs, mayors, congressmen, judges, police officers and—with the election of Obama—the president of the United States.

While the new type of race-based politics differed in form from the old racism of the Southern slavocracy and the white supremacists, it came to serve a similar function—to obscure the basic class questions and block the development of a unified movement of workers of all races on the basis of their common class interests.

The integration of the politics of race into the framework of bourgeois rule has coincided with a massive assault on the social conditions of the working population. Among those most affected by the growth of poverty and social misery are the poorest sections of African-Americans, who are without a doubt economically far worse off than they were in the 1960s.

What is striking in the statements of Obama and recent editorials and columns in the *New York Times* is the degree to which supposedly “left” or “liberal” political forces are seeking to promote what can only be called a fundamentally racist understanding of racism. They are engaged in creating and developing arguments that go very far toward legitimizing intellectually the arguments of the racists themselves.

With social inequality and class divisions now at levels not seen since the 1920s, the media, the political establishment and the various identity politics-based organizations that orbit the Democratic Party never pass up an opportunity to reinforce the supposed massive racial divide in America. Hence the endless calls for a “national conversation on race.”

Totally absent from these “conversations” is any consideration of the social conditions confronting the great majority of the population. Inconvenient truths such as the decay of cities like Baltimore and Detroit, despite having been governed by African-Americans for decades; the growth of poverty in predominantly white areas; or the consequences of the policies of the Obama administration are simply ignored.

These class issues cannot be discussed because to raise them would highlight what millions of workers of all races are coming to understand: that racism and racial politics are ideological props for a bankrupt and diseased social order—capitalism.

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