

Race and Class: An Intersectional Approach

In his groundbreaking 1903 treatise, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, “for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” A century later, and a full generation removed from the battles of the Civil Rights era, many now suggest that class, not race, is the greatest cleavage in American society. They fear that talk of race and the evils of racism obscure the more powerful politics of class and divide those sharing a common economic interest. Such claims hinge upon what is meant by race and class, and assume that the two are separable, conceptually and strategically.

In truth, neither race nor class is well understood. Perhaps the most critical flaw in our formulations of race and class is that they are assumed to be phenotypical markers or economic locations ahistorically derived and acontextually applied. Our current understanding of race and class did not arrive as the culmination of inevitable objective, historical logic. Race and class acquired meaning over time and are not comprehensive outside of that development.

History Lessons

From the American Revolution to the Industrial Revolution and Civil War, race and class were uncertain markers in a struggle that ultimately shaped many of the institutional arrangements under which we live today. Through the ideology of the American Revolution, the indentured European servant became a free white laborer while black slavery remained firmly intact and protected by powerful economic interests and guarded by our Constitution. To reconcile the love for liberty with the reality of slavery, Americans adopted an uncomfortable narrative of black inferiority and racial otherness. These developments ensured that the newly emergent industrial working class clearly identified as white.

Immigrants arriving in this country forcibly negotiated a color line protected by law, custom and ideology. The first Immigration and Naturalization Act, unanimously passed by the first Congress, restricted immigration to free whites. The ways in which the Irish, for example, competed for work and adjusted to industrial morality in America made it all but certain that they would adopt and extend the politics of white unity. From this nation’s inception, the race line was used to demarcate and patrol the divide between those who constituted the “We” in “We The People.” It was no surprise when in March of 1857, the United States Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, declared in the *Dred Scott* case that all blacks -- slaves as well as free -- were not and could never become citizens of the United States.

Even when freed blacks were brought into the political community after the Civil War and granted citizenship, a now well-imbedded narrative of black inferiority and legacy of separation ensured that whites did not see themselves as having commonalities with blacks. According to economists Alberto Alesina and Edward Glaeser, much of the difference between American and European welfare systems can be explained by racial heterogeneity. In a pattern that persists today, opponents of welfare programs deploy

racialized narratives to rouse a majority in opposition. In contrast to the generous Civil War pensions, provisions to the Freedman's Bureau were short-lived, meager and stigmatizing. Many believed that welfare provisions to freed slaves were undeserved, and the Bureau was characterized as an immense bureaucracy whose programs were likely to make blacks lazy, dependent and prone to live off of "handouts." Racism contributed to the undoing of Reconstruction, but the failure of Reconstruction to secure Blacks' rights as citizens and free laborers accelerated racism's spread until, by the early 20th Century, it had fully pervaded the nation's culture and politics, with profound class consequences, complicating the efforts of reformers for generations.

Not only were blacks excluded from the bevy of New Deal programs, race was carefully used to narrow these programs, limit their applicability and ultimately to reverse their trajectory, to the detriment of similarly situated whites. New Deal programs could not survive the Southern voting block unless they were carefully restricted to leave the region's racial patterns undisturbed. As a consequence of our racialized past, Americans live with a comparatively thin social welfare system.

The phenomenal economic growth of the post-WWII period was shaped by the racially inscribed New Deal institutions to produce the economic reality and new identity of the middle class, from which blacks were substantially excluded. The racism that influenced the New Deal programs and excluded blacks institutionalized racial disparities and imprinted the emergent middle class as white. The invisibility of the racial imprint on middle-class consciousness and institutions makes it possible for rejuvenated narratives of black otherness and unworthiness, conceived in the antebellum period, to persist, now explained in cultural terms rather than biology. The narrative of the American Dream – hard work and fair play -- is the primary explanation for social mobility. Race is a critical part of the construction of class-as-merit. It is this individualistic ideology that helps to defeat class solidarity.

Today's Tasks

Race is so intimately intertwined with our class understandings that a politics of class will ultimately be split asunder by the subterranean use of race. Today, the race issue undergirds messages on taxes, government spending, poverty, immigration, crime, rights, values and even urban development. The racial mythology of the welfare state has become so entrenched in party politics that it constrains the policy choices for progressive change that would benefit all Americans, whatever their color or class. Race was critical to the development of arrangements that prevent class solidarity and a political movement hostile to helping citizens in need. American exceptionalism, characterized by a weak labor movement, a thin social welfare apparatus and a stronger states' rights institutional framework, cannot be understood without seeing the role that race has played as our formative institutions were developed. Class identity and class consciousness itself has been thoroughly shaped and limited by our racialized arrangements. Because class is understood as an individual position, it is an empty vessel for building up a progressive movement. All but the most destitute and wealthiest Americans consider themselves middle-class.

As we move toward a majority-minority nation, the need to develop and sustain multi-racial, multi-class coalitions will become increasingly important. The challenge is to link -- to integrate -- the interests of people of color with those of the white working and middle classes without losing sight of race. Race and class inequalities are inextricably linked, and collective solidarity across races can be achieved only by fleshing out their intersections, not by ignoring them. The most successful multi-racial, multi-class progressive movements in the United States tackled race directly. Multi-racial coalitions were critical to Abolition movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and even the New Deal coalition. The key to whether progressive movements will obtain widespread support or be vulnerable to the negative use of race, implicitly or explicitly deployed, has been their commitment to interracial solidarity.

Summing Up

Long-standing institutional arrangements and deeply imbedded social narratives were disrupted by the transformation following the Civil War. As freed slaves were incorporated into the body politic of the nation, white workers and farmers glimpsed the possibility of solidarity along class lines un-encumbered by racial division. The Populist movement sought to harness this possibility into a broad-based, multi-racial alliance of white farmers, trade workers and freed slaves. Southern planters, fearing an alliance between white and blacks, used race to split the movement. Fifty years later, union efforts were similarly stymied because of the fear of disrupting the racial order of the South. The CIO's de-emphasizing race and failing to make strong appeals to black workers made it virtually impossible to generate the grassroots support necessary to combat the exclusions and weaknesses of New Deal labor legislation. Indeed, Southern fears of returning black soldiers joining the union movement were part of the impetus for the Taft-Hartley Act. In the late '70s Cleveland Mayor Dennis Kucinich tried to build a progressive movement by emphasizing economic issues, since these united various city constituencies, but downplaying social issues, the most important of which was race. In doing so, race-baiting crept into the election and destroyed his chances of uniting the city's black and white working-class neighborhoods.

A closer look at the evolution and interplay of race and class in America illustrates the limitations of a race-neutral politics of class. Progressives who call for universalist programs that focus on class in lieu of race offer no mechanism for instilling the social solidarity necessary to propel a progressive agenda forward. Targeted universalism is a strategy that recognizes the need for a platform that is universal and also responsive to the needs of the particular. Leadership can also make a difference. Both Harold Washington, in Chicago, and Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa built broad-based multi-racial, multi-class coalitions and succeeded by keeping both race and class issues in focus. There has never been, at least in 20th Century America, a progressive political movement built solely on class. To inoculate such efforts from divisive race-baiting, there must be discourse to inspire whites to link their fates to nonwhites. This cannot be done by ignoring race, but by finding a way to speak to a multi-racial, multi-class audience

with ideas like targeted universalism and with language that unashamedly embraces American values of justice.

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