YOUNG DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS

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DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST PERSPECTIVES

Toward a Socialist Theory of Racism

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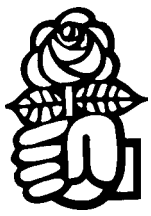
What is the relationship between the struggle against racism and socialist theory and practice in the United States? Why should people of color active in antiracist movements take democratic socialism seriously? And how can American socialists today learn from inadequate attempts by socialists in the past to understand the complexity of racism?

In this pamphlet, I try to address these crucial questions facing the democratic socialist movement. First, I examine past Marxist efforts to comprehend what racism is and how it operates in varying contexts. Second, I attempt to develop a new conception of racism which builds upon, yet goes beyond the Marxist tradition. Third, I examine how this new conception sheds light on the roles of racism in the American past and present. Last, I try to show that the struggle against racism is both morally and politically necessary for democratic socialists.



Past Marxist Conceptions of Racism

Most socialist theorizing about racism has occurred within a Marxist framework and has focused on the Afro-American experience. While my analysis concentrates on people of African descent, particularly Afro-Americans, it also has important implications for analyzing the racism that plagues other peoples of color, such as Spanish-speaking Americans (for example, Chicanos and Puerto Ricans), Asians, and Native Americans.

There are four basic conceptions of racism in the Marxist tradition. The first subsumes racism under the general rubric of working-class exploitation. This viewpoint tends to ignore forms of racism not determined by the workplace.

At the turn of the century, this position was put forward by many leading figures in the Socialist party, particularly Eugene Debs. Debs believed that white racism against peoples of color was solely a "divide-and-conquer strategy" of the ruling class and that any attention to its operations "apart from the general labor problem" would constitute racism in reverse.

My aim is not to castigate the Socialist party or insinuate that Debs was a racist. The Socialist party had some distinguished black members, and Debs had a long history of fighting racism. But any analysis that confines itself to oppression in the workplace overlooks racism's operation in other spheres of life. For the Socialist party, this yielded a "color-blind" strategy for resisting racism in which all workers were viewed simply as workers with no specific identity or problems. Complex racist practices within and outside the workplace were reduced to mere strategies of the ruling class.

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The second conception of racism in the Marxist tradition acknowledges the specific operation of racism within the workplace (for example, job discrimination and structural inequality of wages) but remains silent about these operations outside the workplace. This viewpoint holds that peoples of color are subjected both to general working-class exploitation and to a specific "super-exploitation" resulting from less access to jobs and lower wages. On the practical plane, this perspective accented a more intense struggle against racism than did Debs' viewpoint, and yet it still limited this struggle to the workplace. The third conception of racism in the Marxist tradition, the so-called "Black Nation thesis," has been the most influential among black Marxists. It claims that the operation of racism is best understood as a result of general and specific working-class exploitation and national oppression. This viewpoint holds that Afro-Americans constitute, or once constituted, an oppressed nation in the Black Belt South and an oppressed national minority in the rest of American society.

There are numerous versions of the Black Nation Thesis. Its classical form was put forth by the American Communist party in 1928, was then modified in the 1930 resolution and codified in Harry Haywood's Negro Liberation (1948). Some small Leninist organizations still subscribe to the thesis, and its most recent reformulation appeared in James Forman's Self-Determination and the African-American People (1981). All of these variants adhere to Stalin's definition of a nation set forth in his Marxism and the National Question (1913) which states that "a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." Despite its brevity and crudity, this formulation incorporates a crucial cultural dimension overlooked by the other two Marxist accounts of racism.

Furthermore, linking racist practices to struggles between dominating and dominated nations (or peoples) has been seen as relevant to the plight of Native Americans, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans who were disinherited and decimated by white colonial settlers. Such models of "internal colonialism" have important implications for organizing strategies because they give particular attention to critical linguistic and cultural forms of oppression. They remind us that much of the American West consists of lands taken from Native Americans and from Mexico.

Since the Garveyite movement of the 1920s, which was the first mass movement among Afro-Americans, the black left has been forced to take seriously the cultural dimension of the black freedom struggle. Marcus Garvey's black nationalism rendered most black Marxists "proto-Gramscians" in at least the limited sense that they took cultural concerns more seriously than many other Marxists. But this concern with cultural life was limited by the Black Nation Thesis itself. Although the theory did inspire many impressive struggles against racism by the predominantly white left, particularly in the 1930s, its ahistorical racial definition of a nation, its purely statistical determination of national boundaries (the South was a black nation because of its then black majority population), and its illusory conception of a distinct black national economy ultimately rendered it an inadequate analysis.

The fourth conception of racism in the Marxist tradition claims that racist practices result not only from general and specific working-class exploitation but also from xenophobic attitudes that are not strictly reducible to class exploitation. From this perspective, racist attitudes have a life and logic of their own, dependent upon psychological factors and cultural practices. This viewpoint was motivated primarily by opposition to the predominant role of the Black Nation Thesis on the American and Afro-American left. Its most prominent exponents were W. E. B. DuBois and Oliver Cox.

Toward a More Adequate Conception of Racism

This brief examination of past Marxist views leads to one conclusion. Marxist theory is indispensable yet ultimately inadequate for grasping the complexity of racism as a historical phenomenon. Marxism is indispensable because it highlights the relation of racist prac-

tices to the capitalist mode of production and recognizes the crucial role racism plays within the capitalist economy. Yet Marxism is inadequate because it fails to probe other spheres of American society where racism plays an integral role-especially the psychological and cultural spheres. Furthermore, Marxist views tend to assume that racism has its roots in the rise of modern capitalism. Yet, it can easily be shown that although racist practices were shaped and appropriated by modern capitalism, racism itself predates capitalism. Its roots lie in the earlier encounters between the civilizations of Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America-encounters that occurred long before the rise of modern capitalism.

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It indeed is true that the very category of "race"-denoting primarily skin color-was first employed as a means of classifying human bodies by Francois Bernier, a French physician, in 1684. The first authoritative racial division of humankind is found in the influential Natural System (1735) of the preeminent naturalist of the 18th century, Caroluc Linnaeus. Both of these instances reveal European racist practices at the level of intellectual codificaton since both degrade and devalue non-Europeans. Racist folktales, mythologies, legends, and stories that function in the everyday life of common people predate the 17th and 18th centuries.

For example, Christian anti-Semitism and Euro-Christian antiblackism were rampant throughout the Middle Ages. These false divisions of humankind were carried over to colonized Latin America where anti-Indian racism became a fundamental pillar of colonial society and influenced later mestizo national development. Thus racism is as much a product of the interaction of cultural ways of life as it is of modern capitalism. A more adequate conception of racism should reflect this twofold context of cultural and economic realities in which racism has flourished.

A new analysis of racism builds on the best of Marxist theory (particularly Antonio Gramsci's focus on the cultural and ideological spheres), and yet it goes beyond by incorporating three key assumptions:

1. Cultural practices, including racist discourses and actions, have multiple power functions (such as domination over non-Europeans) that are neither reducible to nor intelligible in terms of class exploitation alone. In short these practices have a reality of their own and cannot simply be reduced to an economic base.

2. Cultural practices are the medium through which selves are produced. We are who and what we are owing primarily to cultural practices. The complex process of people shaping and being shaped by cultural practices involves the use of language, psychological factors, sexual identities, and aesthetic conceptions that cannot be adequately grasped by a social theory primarily focused on modes of production at the macrostructural level.

3. Cultural practices are not simply circumscribed by modes of production; they also are bounded by civilizations. Hence, cultural practices cut across modes of production. (For example, there are forms of Christianity that exist in both precapitalist and capitalist societies.)

An analysis of racist practices in both premodern and modern Western civilization yields both continuity and discontinuity. Even Marxism can be shown to be both critical of and captive to a Eurocentrism that can justify racist practices. Although Marxist theory remains indispensable, it obscures the manner in which cultural practices, including notions of "scientific" rationality, are linked to particular ways of life.

A common feature of the four Marxist conceptions examined earlier is that their analyses remain on the macrostructural level. They focus on the role and function of racism within and between significant institutions such as the workplace and government. Any adequate conception of racism indeed must include such a macrostructural analysis, one that highlights the changing yet persistent forms of class exploitation and political repression of peoples of color. But a fully adequate analysis of racism also requires an investigation into the genealogy and ideology of racism and a detailed microinstitutional analysis. Such an analysis would encompass the following:

1. A genealogical inquiry into the ideology of racism, focusing on the kinds of metaphors and concepts employed by dominant European (or white) supremacists in various epochs in the West and on ways in which resistance has occurred.

2. A microinstitutional or localized analysis of the mechanisms that sustain white supremacist discourse in the everyday life of non-Europeans (including the ideological production of certain kinds of selves, the means by which alien and degrading normative cultural styles, aesthetic ideals, psychosexual identities, and group perceptions are constituted) and ways in which resistance occurs.

3. A macrostructural approach that emphasizes the class exploitation and political repression of non-European peoples and ways in which resistance is undertaken.

The first line of inquiry aims to examine modes of European domination of non-European peoples; the second probes forms of European subjugation of non-European peoples; and the third focuses on types of European exploitation and repression of non-European peoples. These lines of theoretical inquiry, always traversed by male supremacist and heterosexual supremacist discourses, overlap in complex ways, and yet each highlights a distinctive dimension of the racist practices of European peoples vis-a-vis non-European peoples.

This analytical framework should capture the crucial characteristics of European racism anywhere in the world. But the specific character of racist practices in particular times and places can be revealed only by detailed historical analyses that follow these three methodological steps. Admittedly, this analytic approach is an ambitious one, but the complexity of racism as a historical phenomenon demands it. Given limited space, I shall briefly sketch the contours of each step.

For the first step-the genealogical inquiry into predominant European supremacist discourses-there are three basic discursive logics: Judeo-Christian, scientific, and psychosexual discourses. I am not suggesting that these discourses are inherently racist, but rather that they have been employed to justify racist practices. The Judeo-Christian racist logic emanates from the Biblical account of Ham looking upon and failing to cover his father Noah's nakedness and thereby receiving divine punishment in the form of the blackening of his progeny. In this highly influential narrative, black skin is a divine curse, punishing disrespect for and rejection of paternal authority.

The scientific logic rests upon a modern philosophical discourse guided by Greek ocular metaphors (for example Eye of the Mind) and is undergirded by Cartesian notions of the primacy of the subject (ego, self) and the preeminence of representation. These notions of the self are buttressed by Baconian ideas of observation, evidence, and confirmation which promote the activities of observing, comparing, measuring, and ordering physical characteristics of human bodies: Given the renewed appreciation and appropriation of classical antiquity in the 18th century, these "scientific" activities of observation were regulated by classical aesthetic and cultural norms (Greek lips, noses, and so forth).

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Within this logic, notions of black ugliness, cultural deficiency, and intellectual inferiority are legitimated by the value-laden yet prestigious authority of "science," especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. The purposeful distortion of "scientific" procedures to further racist hegemony has an important history of its own. The persistent use of pseudoscientific "research" to buttress racist ideology, even when the intellectual integrity of the "scientific" position has been severely eroded, illustrates how racist ideology can incorporate and use/abuse science.

The psychosexual racist logic arises from the phallic obsessions, Oedipal projections, and anal-sadistic orientations in European cultures which endow non-European (especially African) men and women with sexual prowess; view nonEuropeans as either cruel revengeful fathers, frivolous carefree children, or passive long-suffering mothers; and identify non-Europeans (especially black people) with dirt, odious smell, and feces.

In short, non-Europeans are associated with acts of bodily defecation, violation, and subordination. Within this logic, non-Europeans are walking abstractions, inanimate objects, or invisible creatures. Within all three white supremacist logics-which operate simultaneously and affect the perceptions of both Europeans and non-Europeans-black, brown, yellow, and red peoples personify Otherness and embody alien Difference.

The aim of this first step is to show how these white supremacist logics are embedded in philosophies of identity that suppress difference, diversity and heterogeneity. Since such discourses impede the realization of the democratic socialist ideals of genuine individuality and radical democracy, they must be criticized and opposed. But critique and opposition should be based on an understanding of the development and internal workings of these discourses-how they dominate the intellectual life of the modern West and thereby limit the chances for less racist, less ethnocentric discourses to flourish.

The second step—microinstitutional or localized analysis—examines the operation of white supremacist logics within the everyday lives of people in particular historical contexts. In the case of Afro-Americans, this analysis would include the ways in which "colored," "Negro," and "black" identities were created against a background of both fear and terror and a persistent history of resistance that gave rise to open rebellion in the 1960s. Such an analysis must include the extraordinary and equivocal role of evangelical Protestant Christianity (which both promoted and helped contain black resistance) and the blend of African and U. S. southern AngloSaxon Protestants and French Catholics from which emerged distinctive Afro-American cultural styles, language, and aesthetic values.

The objective of this second step is to show how the various white supremacist discourses shape non-European self-identities, influence psychosexual sensibilities, and help set the context for oppositional (but also co-optable) nonEuropean cultural manners and mores. This analysis also reveals how the oppression and cultural domination of Native Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and other colonized people differ significantly (while sharing many common features) from that of Afro-Americans. Analyses of internal colonialism, national oppression, and cultural imperialism have particular significance in explaining the territorial displacement and domination that confront these peoples.

The third step—macrostructural analysis—discloses the role and function of class exploitation and political repression and how racist practices buttress them. This step resembles traditional Marxist theories of racism, which focus primarily on institutions of economic production and secondarily on the state and public and private bureaucracies. But the nature of this focus is modified in that economic production is no longer viewed as the sole or major source of racist practices. Rather it is seen as a crucial source among others. To put it somewhat crudely, the capitalist mode of production constitutes just one of the significant structural constraints determining what forms racism takes in a particular historical period. Other key structural constraints include the state, bureaucratic modes of control, and the cultural practices of ordinary people.

The specific forms that racism takes depend on choices people make within these structural constraints. In this regard, history is neither deterministic nor arbitrary; rather it is an open-ended sequence of (progressive or regressive) structured social practices over time and space. Thus the third analytical step, while preserving important structural features of Marxism such as the complex interaction of the economic, political, cultural, and ideological spheres of life, does not privilege a priori the economic sphere as a means of explaining other spheres of human experience. But this viewpoint still affirms that class exploitation and state repression do take place, especially in

the lives of non-Europeans in modern capitalist societies.

Racism in the American Past and Present

This analytical framework should help explain how racism has operated throughout United States history. It focuses on the predominant form racism takes in the three major historical configurations of modern capitalism: industrial capitalism, monopoly capitalism, and multinational corporate capitalism. It is worth noting that although we have been critical of Marxist explanations of racist practices, Marxist theory remains highly illuminating and provides the best benchmarks for periodizing modern history.

U.S. industrial capitalism was, in part, the fruit of black slavery in America. The lucrative profits from cotton and tobacco production in the slave-ridden U.S. South contributed greatly to the growth of manufacturing (especially textiles) in the U. S. North. The industrial capitalist order in the North not only rested indirectly upon the productive labor of black slaves in the South, it also penetrated the South after the Civil War along with white exploitation and repression of former black slaves. In addition, U.S. industrial capitalism was consolidated only after the military conquest and geographical containment of indigenous and Mexican peoples and the exploitation of Asian contract laborers.

On the cultural level, black, brown, yellow, and red identities were reinforced locally, reflecting the defensive and deferential positions of victims who had only limited options for effective resistance. For example, this period is the age of the "colored" identity of Africans in the United States.

The advent of the American empire helped usher in U. S. monopoly capitalism. Given both the absence of a strong centralized state and a relatively unorganized working class, widespread centralization of the capitalist economy occurred principally in the form of monopolies, trusts, and holding companies. As the United States took over the last remnants of the Spanish empire (for example, in Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam) and expanded its economic presence in South America, U. S. racist ideology flourished.

Jim Crow laws-consciously adopted models for apartheid in South Africa-were instituted throughout the South. Exclusionary immigration laws-supported by the lily white American Federation of Labor-were enacted, and reservations ("homelands") were set up for indigenous peoples. Mexican and indigenous peoples were removed from their lands through the use of force and by the courts. A settler colonial regime was established in the Southwest to oversee the extraction of raw materials and to subject the Mexican population.

At the same time, America opened its arms to the European "masses yearning to be free," principally because of a labor-shortage in the booming urban industrial centers. In this period, a small yet significant black middle class began to set up protest organizations such as the NAACP, National Urban League, and the National Federation of Afro-American Women. Limited patronage networks were established for black middle-class enhancement (for example, Booker T. Washington's "machine"). This period is the age of the "Negro" identity of Africans in the United States.

Some influential blacks were permitted limited opportunities to prosper and thereby seen as models of success for the black masses to emulate. Despite its courageous efforts on behalf of black progress, the NAACP in this period could not help but seen as a vehicle for severely constricted black gains. The NAACP was defiant in rhetoric; liberal in vision, legalistic in practice, and headed by elements of the black middle class which often influenced the interests of the organization.

The emergence of the United States as the preeminent world power after World War II provided the framework for the growth of multinational corporate capitalism. The devastation of Europe (including the weakening of its vast empires), the defeat of Japan, and the tremendous sacrifice of lives and destruction of industry in the Soviet Union facilitated U. S. world hegemony. U. S. corporate penetration into European markets (opened and buttressed by the Marshall Plan), Asian markets, some African markets, and, above all, Latin American markets set the stage for unprecedented U. S. economic prosperity. This global advantage, along with technological innovation, served as the hidden background for the so-called American Way of Life-a life of upward social mobility leading to material comfort and convenience. Only in the postwar era did significant numbers of the U.S. white middle class participate in this dream.

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Aware of its image as leader of the "free world" (and given the growing sensitivity to racism in the aftermath of the holocaust), the U.S. government began to respond cautiously to the antiracist resistance at home. This response culminated in the Brown v. Board of Education school desegregation decision (1954) and the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 respectively. The ramifications of the court decision and legislation affected all peoples of color (and white women) but had the greatest impact on those able to move up the social ladder primarily by means of education. As a result, the current period of U.S. multinational corporate capitalism has witnessed the growth of a significant middle class of peoples of color. Overt racist language-even under the Reagan administration-has become unfashionable; coded racist language expressing hostility to "affirmative action, " "busing, " and "special interests" has now replaced overt racist discourse.

As the legal barriers of segregation have been torn down, the underclass of black and brown working and poor people at the margins of society has grown. For the expanding middle class of people of color, political disenfranchisement and job discrimination have been considerably reduced. But, simultaneously, a more insidious form of class and racial stratification intensified-educational inequality. In an increasingly technological society, rural and inner city schools for people of color and many working class and poor whites serve to reproduce the present racial and class stratified structure of society. Children of the poor, who are disproportionately people of color, are tracked into an impoverished educational system and then face unequal opportunities when they enter the labor force (if steady, mean-

ingful employment is even a possibility).

In the past decade, American multinational corporate capitalism has undergone a deep crisis, owing primarily to increased competition with Japanese, European, and even some Third World corporations;a rise in energy costs brought about by the OPEC cartel; the precarious structure of international debt owed to American and European banks by Third World countries; and victorious anticolonial struggles that limit lucrative capital investments somewhat.

The response of the Reagan administration to this crisis was, in part, to curtail the public sector by cutting back federal transfer payments to the needy, diminishing occupational health and safety and environmental protection, increasing low wage service sector jobs, and granting tax incentives and giveaways to large corporations. Those most adversely affected by these policies have been blue collar industrial workers and the poor, particularly women and children. Thus Reagan's policies, which were often supported by the coded racist language of the religious right and secular neoconservatives, are racist in consequence. Poor women and children are disproportionately people of color, and jobs in the "rust belt" industries of auto and steel played a major role in black social mobility in the postwar period.

Socialism and Antiracism: Two Inseparable Yet Not Identical Goals

It should be apparent that racist practices directed against black, brown, yellow, and red people are an integral element of U. S. history, including present day American culture and society. This means not simply that Americans have inherited racist attitudes and prejudices, but, more importantly, that institutional forms of racism are embedded in American society in both visible and invisible ways. These institutional forms exist not only in remnants of de jure job, housing, and educational discrimination and political gerrymandering. They also manifest themselves in a de facto labor market segmentation, produced by the exclusion of large numbers of peoples of color from the socioeconomic mainstream. (This exclusion results from limited educational opportunities, devastated families, a disproportionate presence in the prison population, and widespread police brutality.)

It also should be evident that past Marxist conceptions of racism have often prevented U. S. socialist movements from engaging in antiracist activity in a serious and consistent manner. In addition, black suspicion of white-dominated political movements (no matter how progressive) as well as the distance between these movements and the daily experiences of peoples of color have made it even more difficult to fight racism effectively.

Furthermore, the disproportionate white middle-class composition of contemporary democratic socialist organizations creates cultural barriers to the participation by peoples of color. Yet this very participation is a vital precondition for greater white sensitivity to antiracist struggle and to white acknowledgment of just how crucial antiracist struggle is to the U. S. socialist movement. Progressive organizations often find themselves going around in a vicious circle. Even when they have a great interest in antiracist struggle, they are unable to attract a critical mass of people of color because of their current predominately white racial and cultural composition. These organizations are then stereotyped as lily white, and significant numbers of people of color refuse to join.

The only effective way the contemporary democratic socialist movement can break out of this circle (and it is possible because the bulk of democratic socialists are among the least racist of Americans) is to be sensitized to the critical importance of antiracist struggles. This conscientization cannot take place either by reinforcing agonized white consciences by means of guilt, nor by presenting another grand theoretical analysis with no practical implications. The former breeds psychological paralysis among white progressives, which is unproductive for all of us; the latter yields important discussions but often at the expense of concrete political engagement. Rather what is needed is more widespread participation by predominantly white democratic socialist organizations in antiracist struggles-whether those struggles be for the political, economic, and cultural empowerment of Latinos, blacks, Asians, and Native Americans or antiimperialist struggles against U.S. support for oppressive regimes in South Africa, Chile, the Philippines, and the occupied West Bank.

A major focus on antiracist coalition work will not only lead democratic socialists to act upon their belief in genuine individuality and radical democracy for people around the world; it also will put socialists in daily contact with peoples of color in common struggle. Bonds of trust can be created only within concrete contexts of struggle. This interracial interaction guarantees neither love nor friendship. Yet it can yield more understanding and the realization of two overlapping goals- democratic socialism and antiracism. While engaging in antiracist struggles, democratic socialists can also enter into a dialogue on the power relationships and misconceptions that often emerge in multiracial movements for social justice in a racist society. Honest and trusting coalition work can help socialists unlearn Eurocentrism in a self-critical manner and can also demystify the motivations of white progressives in the movement for social justice.

We must frankly acknowledge that a democratic socialist society will not necessarily eradicate racism. Yet a democratic socialist society is the best hope for alleviating and minimizing racism, particularly institutional forms of racism. This conclusion depends on a candid evaluation that guards against utopian self-deception. But it also acknowledges the deep moral commitment on the part of democratic socialists of all races to the dignity of all individuals and peoples-a commitment that impels us to fight for a more libertarian and egalitarian society. Therefore concrete antiracist struggle is both an ethical imperative and political necessity for democratic socialists. It is even more urgent as once again racist policies become more acceptable to many Americans.

A more effective democratic socialist movement engaged in antiracist and antiimperialist struggle can help turn the tide. It depends on how well we understand the past and present, how courageously we act, and how true we remain to our democratic socialist ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy.

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