

Tearing Racism up from its Capitalist Roots

An African Anarchist-Communist Approach

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Racism has been a curse in South Africa, and remains embedded in the society. But how scientific are racist ideas? Where do they come from? And how can we fight racism and create a truly equal and fair society? What do we as revolutionary anarchists think?

Racial conflict, inequality, and hatred are not natural, but fed and reared by capitalism and the state. To really change the system, we need a massive programme of upgrading education, health, housing and services; an end to the racist heap labour system; a challenge to the ideological (ideas) control that splits the working class; and a radical redistribution of wealth and power to the working class and poor –which in South Africa, means primarily the black working class and poor –as part of a social revolution.

Different Races?

The idea of “race” is there are different basic types of people, with different appearances – and different, built-in abilities, cultures and behaviours. This gets tied to the ideas like: races have unequal abilities, every member of race acts in one way all the time, races cannot co-exist peacefully without special rules, and some races are born to rule, others born as “hewers of wood and drawers of water.”

Even if these ideas are not openly said so much these days (leaving aside people like Penny Sparrow), they still exist, in common ideas like: some races are better at sports, some races are crueller, some are greedier, or that “races” are always in conflict, or that you can’t trust people in different “races,” or that inventions are made by different “races.”

But these ideas are false. It is true people look different. The fact is there is only one humankind. All humans have a common descent from Africa. Nature doesn’t strike twice, it never creates the same thing twice. Different races were not born in different areas. Evolutionary evidence shows common ancestry (“monogenesis”). That means humans are one species, with one common origin and one set of common abilities and one common human nature.

As people migrated around the world and around Africa, there was some variation in appearance and body. Nobody survive in that hot sub-equatorial regions without dark skin pigmentation: where temperature is extremely hot, at 35 degrees Celsius and up, very dark skin with a lot of melanin is key; also people had to be more light-skinned in colder and less sunny climates. People become whiter in such climates. Limited transportation created more isolation between areas, so there was sharper variation in some cases.

Science and Society

So there is really one specific species that moved out of Africa to Europe, Asia and the Americas, but this did not lead to new species. Instead we can think of a common family of African descent, with many children, but a lot of mixing due to migration, wars and trade.

Science shows clearly that all races have the same abilities, which is obvious because all people are actually one race. Evolutionary and biological evidence shows no variation between what people think of as races, in terms of the brain or other abilities, but it shows lots of variation inside “races.”

So even to talk about “races” is actually a problem. What is the meaning of the word? In fact people don’t even agree what defines a “race.” For example, some people considered white in

South Africa, like Jews, were not considered “real” Europeans in a large parts of Europe. Adolf Hitler’s racism saw Eastern European whites (Slavs) as sub-human people. People with any black African ancestry are today defined as “black” or “African” in the USA, but those exact same people would be defined as “Coloured” but not black African in South Africa. The race category “Caucasian” includes white Europeans, but also Arabs, Berbers, Lebanese, Turks and Indians, but in apartheid South Africa, Christian or Jewish Arabs and Lebanese were defined as white, but Muslim Arabs and Turks as Coloureds, and all Indians (no matter the religion) were defined as a specific Indian group.

The racial inequalities we see in many countries – with black African people often victims of extreme racism – does not come from nature. It comes from how society is set up. I will show below how racism is built by capitalism, colonialism and states.

Evolution

Sadly, racist ideas have abused the theory of evolution. This theory explained why people are all basically the same, and also why some groups look a bit different to other groups. People today are all part of one species: homo-sapiens or modern humans. This is very different from earlier types like homo-erectus. It is completely wrong to think that some people are somehow less evolved than others, or closer to apes.

This horrible abuse of evolution by racists has led some people to reject the idea of evolution, thinking it claims means blacks are less than whites. In fact the theory shows people are the same! Charles Darwin, who pioneered the theory, insisted all humans had common African descent and were one group.

Inventions?

This evolution is a very powerful challenge to racist ideas. The theory of evolution proves that we as humankind come from one source, and are all basically equal in all spheres of ability.

It is nonsense to say one “race” invented something, or to try claim credit for an invention in the past, just because you look similar to an inventor. Inventions are made by individuals, existing in a specific society, and are made possible by certain types of social structure, and always draw on older ideas and innovations – and from different societies. All the achievements of people in the past are common human heritage, not owned by any group.

The Roots

When we see racism in modern day society, we need to understand it does not exist because what we call “races” are unequal in the flesh or mind, but because we live in a society based on domination, exploitation, hierarchies and oppression.

In South Africa we can clearly see how modern-day racism emerged from how society developed. During the apartheid period, black (meaning black African, Coloured and Indian) people suffered systematic racism, affected wage levels, services, neighbourhoods, racism, and rights. The white population (around 15% of the population) earned 65% of the total income, while black Africans, at 75% of the population, got 28%. Poverty was linked closely to race and persisted over

time: for example, while 8 out of 10 white children completed high school, around 2 out of 10 black Africans reached and passed matric.

Racist Labour System

This was because capitalism in South Africa developed in the context of European colonial context and dispossession, and a system of white supremacy. The loss of land and a battery of repressive racist laws and practices enabled an economy based on cheap black labour. Black African peasants who succeeded in farming for markets were pushed out of business and into wage labour.

The British Empire was central to many of these processes, and foreign investors, mainly British, were for decades central to the creation of a massive commercial mining industry from the 1870s, based on cheap and unfree (repressed) black labour. Commercial (capitalist) farms emerged around the mines, and also rested on cheap black labour. Massive exploitation, in a racist system, was the bedrock of South African capitalism, and helped fund the state through taxation and through state enterprises. The state built railways, roads and big industries, all of which increased state and capitalist power.

As manufacturing developed on a massive scale from the 1920s, the racist cheap labour system continued. The state enforced racist measures – low wages, rights abuses, hostels and migrant labour, the township system – which generated the cheap black labour capitalism devoured. Racial and ethnic (“tribal”) division between blacks, and between blacks and whites, helped fracture the working class. Unions usually followed racial lines, and black Africans were not given full union rights until 1995.

The Future

The legacy of this system is everywhere in South Africa. The racist crimes of capitalism and the state were not erased in 1994, racism was institutionalised for many long hard years, and today the township system, the migrant labour system and the cheap black labour system continue, and shape the class system. Poverty, unemployment, low wages and poor conditions are still linked closely to race. Today, the old white capitalist sector works with the new black state elite to oppress the largely black working class. Continuing inequality perpetuate racial conflicts, and also generates new forms of racism, such as the massive xenophobia that exists in South Africa since 1994.

In closing, racial conflict, inequality, and hatred are not natural. All people are equal, and racial conflict is not caused by people looking different. Racism, over the last few hundred years, was fed and reared by capitalism and the state. To really change the system, we need a massive programme of upgrading education, health, housing and services; an end to the cheap labour system; a challenge to the ideological (ideas) control that splits the working class; and a radical redistribution of wealth and power to the working class and poor –which in South Africa, means primarily the black working class. and poor –as part of a social revolution.

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