

Class & Race

Burning Questions, Unpopular Answers

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2003

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EXCUSE THE CLASSISM

Do class and race oppressions exist parallel to each other and as dominating forces exclusive of each other? Is one oppression more important to take on and resist than the other? Is it possible for either to effectively “trump” another? Or are these forces inextricably linked and intertwined? Do we perceive them to even be equal forms of domination — dual forces that compliment each other in order to maintain rule by any given regime to be met with the same resistance...and not as one that excuses the other?

I’d like to argue that racism is an excuse. It’s an abstract form of perception that is used as a tool. I’d like to argue that classism can be a way of thinking as well, but class is by all means a concrete action in itself. To hold onto class rule, the ruling class must maintain its own power. The fact that a ruling class “is” is directly related to what it does, whereas there can be a ruling class completely made up of one race, but the fact that the race exists at all, isn’t inextricably linked to what that race does. The job of any ruling class is to maintain its own privilege by actively and systematically controlling how production and consumption is maintained and distributed. The capitalist ruling class does this because they’re in the business of being rich, not racist.

White supremacy is a specific kind of racism that is directly related (but not exclusively) to how the U.S. ruling class divides the working class through forms of domestic policies. It definitely is central to how U.S. capital functions currently, and is a direct result of the factors that went into how European colonizers invaded the land that is now the U.S. Throughout the history of the United States, racism has been used as a social, cultural, political weapon to excuse atrocities committed through acts of genocide and slavery. The struggles of the people whose race has defined their class because of colonial domination in the U.S. helped shape the attitudes of racial separation within the working class as a whole. I would argue that since the civil rights movements of the 1960’s certain races such as African-Americans have become unraveled in their exclusive ties to their class. Since that era, there has been an emerging African-American middle class in the U.S. Although they hardly constitute a majority of the race, this growing class is a reflection of how U.S. white supremacy can and will change like a chameleon in order to meet the reshaping race and class struggles and movements for change.

Another historical situation I’d like to point out is how white supremacy in the U.S. has adapted around the turn of the 20th century to account for immigration from southern and eastern European countries. Poles, Hungarians, Bohemians and other unwanted peoples were NOT considered “white” when they arrived to work poor shit jobs in the States. Before them, Irish immigrants held onto class privilege on par with African-Americans at the time. Over time the U.S. ruling class saw the potential in “Americanizing” them, in other words, teaching them English, giving them educational classes, and investing in their communities in order to prop up their racial status to “white.” What this really meant was that the ruling class was creating the illusion that these new immigrants’ nationalities were of no use anymore, and in fact they had, as a people, more in common with the current Western-European settlers in their class, then they did with the African, Chinese, and Indigenous peoples of their class. This is an example of class domination reshaping its racial policies and attitudes domestically to fit in with their strategy of class domination.

Finally, I’d like to take a look at other colonized lands that fell victim to European invasion, such as the lands that are now considered Mexico. The Spaniards that invaded the indigenous peoples, and colonized their lands, went on to take on unusual class contradictions. After 500 years,

the Latino working class, that is actually made up of a majority of Spanish-speaking descendents of those invading Spaniards, now hold a relatively nebulous class status with the indigenous peoples of what is now Mexico, but hold less class privilege than the African-American working class of the U.S.! Even when Mexican workers attempt to emigrate to the U.S., they are treated as alien, and as an invading workforce by ALL of the races within the U.S. working class, as a result of reactionary class analysis.

These are examples that help point to two major conclusions:

1. The class privilege of any given race within any given state, has the ability to change with different economic, social, and political factors, whether by the hands of the capitalist ruling class itself, or even by the shaping trends of struggles by any given race, nationality, or collaboration of them. This means that class privilege has the potential to be directly related to and the result of the racial status of any given peoples, but isn't fundamentally always directly related.
2. In order for us to understand class struggle and its relationship to race, we absolutely need to think internationally. We need to take into account that race and class interact in unlimited and ever-changing ways throughout the world. If we are to settle on a position concerning racism exclusive to whatever state we live in, our analysis and our actions will be always limited to the borders of the state itself. This is no way to build a movement that will destroy racism and create a classless, stateless society worldwide!

A CHALLENGE TO FELLOW 'ANARCHISTS OF COLOR'

When people call me a "class reductionist," I beam, because it's true! But when I talk about the working class in the United States or about "class war," I am talking about race as well. Building a movement internationally to organize for class struggle is an anti-racist movement. When I speak or write about the liberation of the working class, I'm assumed to be talking about the white working class here in the U.S. This assumption is wrong, white anarchists, as well as my fellow anarchists of color are perpetrators of this presumption.

First off, when I speak of the working class, I'm talking about the international working class, which is made up of a huge majority of people that are NOT of European descent.

Secondly, when I'm talking about the working class in the United States, I'm very clear about the fact that a large majority of African-Americans, Latin peoples, indigenous or "First Nation" peoples, Asians, Pacific Islanders, Arab-Americans, etc. are working class, working poor, migrant workers, unemployed, homeless, on welfare, incarcerated, and single mothers left to raise their children alone and not be paid for their social labor... and so are many people of European descent.

My point is, in order for us to understand how racism interacts with class, and how capitalism, statism, and racism work together to confuse us, we need to critically look at not only how we shape our analysis according to what is, but also according to what kind of movement will win for all working class people who are facing the brutality of capitalism. There are levels of oppression that people face in many different ways, whether faced with a pink slip from work, an eviction notice from a landlord or a police baton to the head. All of these are directly related to how the international ruling class administers its control.

I'd like to focus this part of the essay on engaging in a critique regarding the emerging 'anarchist of color' movement in the United States.

Currently, within the anarchist movement in North America, I believe race is largely spoken about in three contexts when strategizing ways to organize effectively. Sometimes these strategies overlap, and they're sometimes used as alternatives to the others' inability to work the way folks thought they would.

One context is the dialogue about the need for the largely white North American anarchist movement to focus on "bringing in people of color" in order to create a sort of recruitment process within a white-dominated movement. You know, the classic tokenizing strategy.

Let me just say that this is a disgusting practice, that is not only ineffective, but largely a classist and racist way of addressing problems of racism in organizing. It reeks of liberalism, practically taking on a kind of "affirmative action," in order for white anarchists to overcome their culture of guilt. It assumes a strategy that all "people of color" want to join "their" movement. Or that people of color aren't already organizing in our own respective communities. I don't see this happening as much as it did some years ago, but the new practices are also looking pretty grim.

Another current strategy is to brand an organization that is made up of mostly or all white people as fundamentally racist, therefore, they must stop what they're doing and decolonize the way they think about race. I believe this is a reactionary way to build a movement. Shutting things down very easily creates confusion, guilt, and a lot of frustrated people who feel compelled to do nothing at all.

This is also a kind of reaction that recognizes organizations for what they look like, and not for what they can do effectively. From my experience, most of the problems that all anarchists in the United States face are classist problems that are linked with racism. We need to understand and discuss race and class in a manner that both working class "white people" and "people of color" are involved inclusively. Often, I hear people refer to "comfort spaces" as "safe spaces" when meeting to discuss racism. We are fighting to win; we're not fighting to create exclusive meeting spaces that are perfect places that everyone should feel comfortable in. I believe anarchism is about gaining concrete goals, not about creating exclusive and ultimately imperfectable internal social relationships just so we can celebrate feeling good.

A third emerging anarchist practice in the United States, sometimes in response to the former ones, is to create a culture of "racial self-determination," in order for anarchists of different races to only organize within their own communities. While being an understandable reaction to create "safe space," and possibly an effective strategy to address racism by our European-American counterparts, this is a potentially dangerous way to organize.

I can't explain how many times I've heard middle class university-bred people of color take this stance, in order to justify knowing what "their" communities want. I'm not using this as a small example, this practice is rampant, and is an extremely classist attitude! While creating autonomous movements to build anti-racist struggle within "communities of color" we need to realize that we have the potential to forget that class-privileged people that are of the same races as us often don't understand the struggle of our communities, and often we let them take and hold leadership positions within our organizations, campaigns, and movements. This can lead to alienation due to class differences, a big lack of winning strategies that are in the interest of our struggling communities, and a disempowering reaction to our lack of results.

There's an overwhelming amount of class-privileged "people of color" spearheading this movement, creating a culture that is class reactionary to all working class people of all races in the

United States. Many of these “activists” claim “self-determination” as an excuse to see their racial ties as what binds them exclusively to their race’s community struggles. These people are also quick to react to what they see as “class trumping race,” and find the common class struggle between people of different races to be not as important as what they share in common with the community in question. Often these “activists” hardly speak the same cultural language as the people they are organizing, and many times, they can’t relate to the experiences of the community they claim to represent.

ANTI-RACIST STRUGGLE THROUGH COLLECTIVE RACIAL IDENTITY?

I’d like to now propose several critiques of what I see currently here in the United States — a new style of anti-racist anarchism being organized autonomously by ‘anarchists of color’. Here are some obstacles I envision that we must overcome:

1. The possibility of “people of color” becoming a new form of nationalism: the idea that people who aren’t “white” should come together to build an autonomous space to organize in, because we share a common experience. This can be an empowering action in many ways, though it can present many problems. I believe different people experience racism in different ways, and it’s one thing to share these experiences with other victims of racism, and to share resources, but to base a social movement solely on resisting racial oppression has a great chance at viewing capitalism through an exclusively racial lens.
2. I also believe that the term ‘people of color’ to define us, is an attempt to counter “whiteness,” in a reactionary way. We are defining ourselves in response to how the ruling class defines people of European descent as “white.” Why, therefore, do we define ourselves as the counter to this lie? Whiteness only exists as an idea, which is a racist one at that. Why should we fall into the trap that capitalist propaganda, media, and colonizing education want us to? I also don’t think the term ‘people of color’ takes into account people of mixed blood, or those non-Europeans who have light skin. We are folks who definitely experience racism as well, in different forms, and we don’t fit the proposed definition. Besides, European-American people can be pretty colorful sometimes.
3. Next, a movement of ‘people of color’ must not assume that only white people are capable of being racist. And I’m not just talking about people of different races thinking acting out against each other here in the United States, I also want to point out the brutal capitalist, fundamentalist, and State socialist regimes worldwide that use racism as a tool for the division of their country’s respective working classes, and the international working class at large. Many of these states are run by groups of people who aren’t of European descent, and they do an excellent job of emphasizing racial divides between different races and nationalities within their respective countries and across the imaginary lines capitalists like to draw.
4. Another foreseeable bump in the road is the chance that we’ll continue to respond to a specific kind of white supremacy that is experienced here in the United States that is exclusive to the rest of the world. It’s one thing to organize against the racism we experience

locally or nationally, but we can't let this define how racism exists universally for people worldwide. In other words, if we aren't organizing with an internationalist focus, we're ultimately thinking along nationalist lines. We need to think and act locally as well as think and act globally (sound familiar?). The idea of "nationalism" comes from European theory anyway, so why should we define our boundaries the way those "bearded white guys" want us to?

5. In recent years, our reaction to white anarchists has been, thus far, quite reactionary. We are quick to respond to what white anarchists do, or what they say, or what theories they use, and dispose of the actions they take in a way that assumes the actions themselves are European-influenced, and therefore fundamentally racist. This is bad. If a bunch of inexperienced and naive German cooks make a bad soup, does that mean that "making soup" itself is fundamentally linked to Germans, regardless of the fact that the problem lies with the failures of one group of German cooks? Does it mean Brazilians can't cook up some "good soup," or that "making soup" is what German cooks do, so Brazilians should avoid it altogether and make salad? Or that...any combination of groups of German and Brazilian cooks can't potentially work together to make kick-ass stew, or even a series of ten-course meals?
6. I've heard anarchists of color conclude that we shouldn't "theorize" because that's what white anarchists do. I've mentioned "working class" to other anarchists of color, and have gotten some of the most classist responses I've ever heard. We, as 'anarchists of color' are not immune to being oppressors over white folks in certain ways, simply due to the fact that we face an institutionalized racism.

Do we continue to build an anti-racist struggle by organizing as people who experience white racism? Is it our responsibility alone? Can we even do it alone, as victims of white supremacy? Is it possible for us to abolish racism without abolishing the ruling class?

I say no to all these questions. We must make our struggle against white supremacy a struggle against racism worldwide, and with those in our class, for a classless, stateless, anti-racist worldwide. I argue that this is the way in which we need to recognize how capitalism works, and I argue that it is the most strategic way to bring about a world free of capitalism.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

One of the major reasons I've committed so much space to criticizing how we, as 'anarchists of color' are organizing, is because it's vital that we discuss how we are moving forward with our theory and action. We aren't incapable of racist and classist ways of organizing, and we need to hold ourselves responsible to ensure that we don't start to believe we are unable to be self-critical, and/or be criticized by people of different races.

We need to think about how to win, and attempt to reach our short and long term goals. We need to create a culture(s) where we can discuss how different forms of oppression are interlinked in a manner that recognizes how they affect our actions. We need to do it frankly, honestly, and constructively. We should not be afraid to say what we feel, due to cultural restrictions that we manifest from our own failures to communicate in an engaging way already.

I'd like to recognize that I haven't even touched patriarchy as a form of oppression here, and how it relates to class and/or race. Hopefully we in NEFAC, and the anarchist movement at large, can work more to further develop organizational positions on how patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, chauvinism, and machismo divides our class, and further creates reactionary attitudes, actions, and culture within the working class. Maybe in a future NEA issue?

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Class & Race
Burning Questions, Unpopular Answers
2003

Retrieved on March 18, 2016 from web.archive.org
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