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On Donovan Jackson and White Race Traitors Who Claim They're Down

Heather Ajani and Ernesto Aguilar

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Both Heather Ajani (a founding member and co-author of the
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Can the white-left really end whiteness and to the benefit of whom?

This question is crucial to consider as anti-authoritarians and other revolutionaries forge a path to freedom. Even with the “new” race consciousness being infused into the anarchist/radical left, the color of these politics is still white. Banners, slogans, political statements, articles, etc. all continue to claim that struggle is maintained against all forms of domination, but for whose freedom? Such perspectives color the ways many white people see the world. From the composition of movements to heinous instances, like the police abuse of Donovan Jackson, white radicalism leaves much to be desired.

The case of white ‘race traitor’ politics, and derivatives like Bring the Ruckus, is an adequate example of this. In brief, ‘race traitor’ advocates seek to popularize “defection” of whites from privilege. BTR takes the ‘race traitor’ philosophy up in making to “break

up this unholy alliance between the ruling class and the white working class by attacking the system of white privilege and the subordination of people of color” its organizational priority. Unfortunately, for all the radical pretensions, such formations maintain aspirations that are liberal at their core. Focus on singular ‘treason to whiteness’ hint to the individualism of such concepts, and implicitly fail to accept white mass unity around race. Even BTR’s “death star” theory, (meaning that if strategic focus is placed on race, which it believes is the weakest point of the American project, the whole system will crumble) puts whites in the center of the struggle, rather than focusing on those who are oppressed by whiteness, and grasping that the key ruptures in American society have (and will) come as a result of communities’ of color uprisings.

White ‘race traitor’ theory is wholly based on the participation of white folks, and refuses to consider the reality people of color worldwide already understand: masses of whites won’t give up their privileges, and will fight to defend the empire to the bitter end. Sadly, white ‘race traitor’ politics are one of a few theories explored by the white left because of its seeming militancy and often catchy rhetoric that theory huggers tend to embrace. This is not to say that it isn’t in some context a valuable resource, but to base one’s politics on one view that whites have somehow been thwarted from participation in revolutionary struggles because of a deal made between bosses and workers is a cop-out symbolic of the very privileges that the theory seeks to critique.

The following quote can be found in a piece by Roy San Filippo on the police beating of Donovan Jackson. While some of the sentiments are fair, such perspectives should remind people of color of the inherent flaws in white ‘race traitor’ politics.

“When Donovan Jackson, a Black youth, was brutally beaten by a white police officer in Inglewood, California last summer, the incident was caught on videotape by Mitchell Crooks, who is white. A revealing twist to

this incident lies in the fact that the first two people arrested in connection with this incident were Jackson, the Black victim, and Crooks, the white man whose videotape exposed the police brutality. In this moment we see enforcement of the color line by the state twice: first in the all too common form of police abuse in the Black community and secondly in the form of the harsh retribution against the person who exposed one instance of that abuse. Crooks's act was an instance of race treason—when a white person violated an unspoken rule of whiteness by actively opposing the state's attempt to enforce the color line, a transgression of the norms of whiteness that the state took so seriously that Crooks was promptly incarcerated. Why are such acts of race treason so threatening? Because the enforcement of the color line is predicated on the belief that the state can determine who is a friend and who is an enemy by the color of their skin. By attacking the institutions of white supremacy and flagrantly violating the norms of whiteness, the state would no longer be able use white skin as reliable determiner of who is a friend and who is a foe to the existing society, undermining the separate deal that the white working class struck with capital.”

Audacious? Certainly, but when followed by the bulk of an article on strategy and choices, it borders on appropriation.

The assumption a white man is videotaping cops to stick it to his white sisters and brothers is a leap of faith; more likely, like numerous recent police tapings, aimed at another motive. It is highly unlikely Mitchell Crooks, the white guy with the camera was patrolling his neighborhood because of swelling numbers of police brutality cases among black youth. In fact, he filmed the incident from his hotel balcony on his vacation.

Crooks didn't give up his privilege. He used the safety of his skin privilege as well as his distance from the incident to film it. He didn't go to the gas station where Donovan Jackson and his father were and risk his physical being in any way. It is true that he was arrested because of the tape and this deserves to be explored, but exploiting the situation to develop a politic that is nearly impossible to put into practice because of its ramifications to those with privilege, is abhorrent.

Herein, we return to the core questions at hand: can the white left end whiteness, and to the benefit of whom? Historically, the bulk of participation by whites in revolutionary struggle has been based on either religious or moral reasoning rather than revolutionary politic, and that participation has also been contingent on furthering the strength of this empire with the infusion of values like justice and equality, rather than seeking to destroy it. It's true that we need to build a strategy against systems that are oppressive, that perpetuate hegemony and domination, but the San Filippo piece, and the approach of groups like BTR, make the discussion of race too dependent on the participation of whites.

Discussions on racial oppression should be led by those who suffer as a reality of those oppressions. This means the responsibility lies with people of color to step up to the theory plate, as well as for white people to stop co-opting the struggles of internalized colonies for their opportunistic benefit. People of color need to build our own critiques, strategies and visions for our communities, for our lives; whites need to step back and realize when they're asserting their own control over our lives and visions. If people of color rely on traditional models of the white-led academy and the "politically enlightened" and white-led left to create more white acculturated rhetoric around race, we will never overcome the ramifications of how it is structured.

Imperialist expansion has fostered growth of the radical left and, to a lesser extent, race consciousness. Yet the white avoidance of culpability, which people of color have long criticized, remains the

same. Seemingly contradictory arguments can't cloud the picture. Even a potentially doomed focus on race by white-led groups for white masses (and the ensuing debates on strategy and focus that such positions inevitably ignite among the bookstore set) fail to obscure, for people of color at least, that someone's avoiding who needs to be the focus of and leading the discussion on race politics.

Bring the Ruckus' mythology of the Donovan Jackson case — where the white male rises up against the empire from the comfort of his hotel balcony, a few hundred feet from where the Black youth gets from white folks what many Black youth before him have — is the kind of petty romanticism that pervades white 'race traitor' politics. Such chauvinism can no longer be acceptable, not that it ever was.