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What is Race?

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As individuals, our racial identity is so intimately inscribed into the ways that we see and experience the world, and other people in it, that it's often taken as a natural and unchanging fact of life. Race is a social construction, meaning that the stigmas and divisions associated with it are born out of political and cultural, rather than purely biological factors. But it's also a material reality – one that plays a central role in shaping the ways that power operates in a specific society. Given the current wave of racist and nationalist reaction sweeping the globe, it is important that anarchists develop a shared understanding of race, and the role that it plays in constructing and reinforcing oppressive hierarchies.

So... what is race, exactly, and what do anarchists have against it?

Well, a broad definition would be to say that it's a particular type of caste system, or a way of classifying people into rigid social hierarchies, based on perceived ancestry and intimately associated with notions of nationalism, citizenship and class.

Most commonly associated with the global system of European colonial dominance known as White Supremacy, race has other close parallels, such as India's varna system, the ethnic

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constructions of Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi, and even religious sectarian divides such as those found between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland or Sunnis and Shia in several Middle Eastern countries.

But while race can, and does assume a variety of different forms based on local demographic and political factors, it has always been, and remains to this day, a cross-class alliance – a way of binding the ruling class and a segment of the exploited classes through a compact of shared identity, in order to project force against those who fall outside of it. Or to put it simply, it's a way that states manipulate large groups of people into believing that they have more in common with their rulers than with the fellow ranks of the oppressed.

An early precursor of modern concepts of race lies in the idea of the barbarian, which was developed independently by the rulers of a diverse number of early states, ranging from the Shang Dynasty in ancient China, to the Greek and Roman Empires of Eurasia, and Aztec and Inca Empires of modern-day Central and South America. By dehumanizing different ethnic groups outside their borders as barbarians, rulers were able to mobilize armies and rationalize the enslavement of captured populations.

Centuries later, the rise and spread of powerful monotheistic religions added a new dimension to the construction of race, as the ideological conception of the barbarian was given new weight by the introduction of the notions of “pagan” or “infidel”. Religious dictates calling for the forced conversion of non-believers sanctified new wars of conquest, waged by the armies of Christianity and Islam. Fearing the expansionary rise of Islam which by the 11th Century had spread deep into the heart of European Christendom, the Catholic Church teamed up with feudal elites to launch the Crusades, a series of holy wars spanning nearly four hundred years and planting the seeds of ethnic, national and sectarian rivalries that continue to this day.

In the final years of the Reconquest of Spain, the Catholic Church ramped up popular sentiments of anti semitism and Christian hysteria by launching the Spanish Inquisition – a bloody purge and forced conversion of Muslims and Jews that provided a horrific new laboratory for the development of race as an internal system of division and social control. The Spanish Reconquest was completed in 1492, and was followed in quick succession by Christopher Columbus’ accidental invasion of the Americas. Believing the so-called “discovery” of the New World to be sign of divine providence after their holy victory against Islam, Spain launched the colonization of the Americas with a brutal religious fervour, waging a genocidal campaign of extermination against the continents’ original inhabitants, alongside mass forced conversions carried out by Jesuit and Franciscan priests.

In the decades that followed, Spain was joined in its pillage of the Americas by Portuguese, Dutch, and French colonialists. They were soon faced with a labour shortage, however, after working many Indigenous slaves to death and killing millions of others through diseases like smallpox. So, beginning in the early 16th century, Portuguese merchants established the transatlantic slave trade, a grotesque process of racial dehumanization whereby millions of people were kidnapped from West Africa and shipped across the ocean to slave-trading posts in the Caribbean and Portuguese plantations in Brazil.

Britain joined the fray in 1607 and quickly set to work expanding the transatlantic slave trade, establishing the vast southern Plantation system and kick-starting a process of unprecedented mass European migration. Within Britain’s thirteen American colonies, a new pact of racial supremacy was forged between settlers of mixed European descent, based on their shared experiences of killing Natives and subjugating Africans.

This new system, white supremacy, provided all white men with a share of the spoils stolen through genocidal territorial

conquest and an economy built on slave labour. It also happened to make a small number of those white men unimaginably rich, setting the stage for the rise of capitalism. Despite ongoing controversy regarding her own racial identity, one of the most comprehensive descriptions of how white supremacy functions in the United States was written by Andrea Smith, who identified its three supporting pillars as: Slavery/Capitalism, Genocide/Colonialism and Orientalism/War.

- The first pillar, Slavery, rests on the commodification of Black bodies, and to their need to be controlled through force and imprisonment.
- The second pillar, Genocide, rests on the need for Indigenous nations to disappear or assimilate into settler society, in order to justify white people's claims to the lands that they currently occupy.
- The final pillar, Orientalism, based on earlier conceptions of the barbarian, conjures up the image of outside forces seeking to infiltrate and destroy society, whether they take the form of Islamic terrorists, hostile foreign states, or simply the spectre of "illegal immigrants" in general.

Over the centuries, these three racial archetypes have been deeply ingrained in the white psyche. And so when Black people cry out that their lives matter, Indigenous people assert claims to their traditional lands and culture, or refugees fleeing wars and poverty demand their rights to political asylum, it is unsettling to the power structure that these pillars prop up. The response of states and ruling elites will always be to attempt to reinforce these pillars by fanning the flames of white paramilitary reaction.

For anarchists who seek a new world built on the destruction of the state and capitalism, our task is to help to knock out the pillars that these systems rest upon. For some, this will mean

severing the false bonds of whiteness and joining the resistance of those who have long struggled under its yoke.

Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity.