

Why Racism? Why Anti-Racism?

Can White People be Allies of People of Color?

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Many things have been impressive about the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020. The extent of the demonstrations, the depth of the anger, and the mass mobilization of the African-American community has been heartening. As I write, weekly and daily protests are still going on, extending into occupations, across the U.S. and even internationally. The U.S. population, which had seemed to be so quiescent, hunkering down during the covid-19 plague and the politically repressive Trump administration, has suddenly burst out in righteous outrage.

One aspect of the protests that has impressed many is the large proportion of white people who are participating. Along with African-Americans, Latinx, Asian-Americans, and Native Americans, white people have sometimes been the majority of the demonstrators. Labelled as “allies” of People of Color, the European-American marchers include many who have suddenly realized that racism still exists in the U.S. So many had let themselves believe that racism was mostly dead. Southern segregation had been abolished by the civil rights movement a half century ago. Anti-discrimination laws had been passed. Prejudice had decreased. Television commercials show mixed-race couples. There had been a Black president. Then the murder of George Floyd by a group of police, in full view of eyewitnesses and cameras, suddenly lit up the scene. It revealed an oppression which had never gone away.

Despite the gains of the past (and there had been gains, such as ending legal Jim Crow), racial prejudice is still widespread among white people. This ranges from the bitter hatred held by neo-Nazi white supremacists to the blindspots, the insensitivity, and ignorance of even those who are subjectively anti-racist (such as myself).

Beyond the ideas and emotions of racial prejudice are the systemic institutional aspects of racial oppression. Schools are more segregated than ever, due to housing segregation. Being last hired, first fired, causes African-American workers to have low seniority and poor pay (and poor housing). Generations of poverty results in young adult People of Color starting out life without family wealth to fall back on (not even the house and car equity which many white working class families have). Large numbers of young Black and Brown men have gone to prison (often for drug-related minor “crimes”), which blights the rest of their lives.

Over all, while legal segregation is gone and discrimination has lessened, African-Americans remain on the bottom of society. Even those who had advanced, have, at most, moved up to the lower middle class, as “white collar” workers. Very, very, few have “made it” to the upper levels of society (especially if we leave out some entertainers and sports figures). What is the reason for this continuation of racial oppression? Why was there racism to begin with?

Why Racism?

Africans were brought to North and South America and the Caribbean to be slaves. They were not kidnapped in Africa so that white people would have someone to feel superior to. They were enslaved so they would do heavy labor for minimal costs. They were brought to the English colonies so they could raise tobacco, sugar cane, and cotton as commodities for the world market. In particular, the cotton trade became the foundation of British wealth, the basis for its industrial revolution and the British empire—and the basis for U.S. capitalism as well. The slaves themselves were commodities, traded, bought and sold on the market. Their “racial” differences from Europeans made it easier to keep them separate and controlled. It permitted the Europeans

to justify to themselves the practice of slavery, despite Christian and democratic ideology (“*all men were created equal*” but that only meant “white” men).

Slavery of Africans was different from Northern and European capitalism. Under mainstream capitalism, the workers were “free” (lacking masters but also lacking tools, capital, or land), forced to temporarily sell their ability to work (their “labor power”) to a capitalist for a wage. Slavery was a bastardized form of capitalism, but one which was important for capitalist industrialism to develop on a world scale.

After the U.S. Civil War, slavery was abolished, but the ex-slaves were not given parcels of the land they had worked for generations (“forty acres and a mule” had been their demand). Without this, they were impoverished and vulnerable. Many became sharecroppers, working for big land owners. Others became workers, laboring for capitalists South or North. Either way, they became a pool of low-paid working people, “super-exploited,” with a living standard below that of the rest of the (white) working class. Big profits were made off the descendants of slaves.

Racism also justified and rationalized white settlers’ genocidal attacks on the Native Americans, in order to take their land, and then the U.S. seizure of half of Mexico. Meanwhile, on a world scale, white supremacy served to motivate European imperialism and colonialism. The European empires seized huge chunks of the world, and forced millions of People of Color to work for them. It was said the sun never set on the British empire nor the blood ever dried. This was justified as “*the white man’s burden*,” even as the wealth of the world flowed into the banks of rich white men.

Besides the cheapness of the labor of Blacks, there was a second advantage which racism gave to the U.S. capitalist class. It was used to split the working class. In general, the white workers (and most U.S. workers were white) accepted their “supremacy” over the African-Americans and other People of Color (such as Chinese immigrants and Chicanos). They got better jobs, promotions, higher wages, and better housing. They were taught that even if they were poor, they were “better than” People of Color—which has been referred to “the wages of whiteness.” All the suffering of white workers, all the anger and dissatisfaction, could be channeled into hostility toward African-Americans. From the slave owners to modern capitalist politicians, the rich have deliberately promoted these prejudices.

Actually these benefits were quite limited. The low wages of the African-American workers pulled down the wages of the European-American workers. The split between races made it hard to form unions, to win gains from the bosses. Unions have remained the weakest in the most racist part of the country, the South. Wherever unions have been successful, it has been necessary to overcome the racism of the white workers. The racial divide is the main reason why the U.S. working class remains behind the Western European working classes in benefits, despite the greater wealth of the U.S. For example, it is the main reason why the U.S. remains the only industrialized country without universal health care.

Currently, the standard of living and working of the U.S. working class has been under attack. Large sections of the white working class has been suffering from the downturn in the economy, deindustrialization, overseas transfers of jobs, automation, and now the coronavirus and its triggering a deep recession. Rather than blame their real enemies, the big capitalists and their political agents, all too many have turned their anger against Black people, Mexicans, Muslims, etc.—People of Color, native or of foreign origin and differing religions. Trump and the Republicans have particularly been whipping this up, while the Democrats are much subtler about it.

All this racism and nativism is to the benefit of the capitalist class (along with other forms of prejudice against women, LGBTQ people, Jews, etc.).

In brief, racism is rooted in capitalism. I do not say that capitalism is the only factor in maintaining racism (much more could be said about social-psychological factors), but it is the major one. It will be impossible to finally end racism so long as capitalist exploitation continues.

Can Whites be Anti-Racist Allies?

It is fascinating to see the widespread participation of European-Americans in the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, even in small towns where there are almost no People of Color. Books on the evils of racism dominate the nonfiction book list. It has become a major topic of discussion among white people and between white and Black people. Big businesses have taken out full-page ads, announcing that they reject racism root and branch. Politicians of both parties have denounced racism, for what that's worth. Demands for controlling police violence are common among both Democrats and Republicans, although they cannot agree on programs. The slogan, "*defund the police*," has become widespread, if unclear as to what it actually implies. Statues of Confederate generals have been pulled down and Confederate flags taken down, which are at least symbolic gestures.

In fact, much of the popular anti-racism lacks clarity as to what it actually means and what should be done to implement it. It is clear why African-Americans are opposed to white supremacy, as well as Latinx people and also Native Americans and Asian-Americans. But why are white people anti-racist and what can they do about it? On what grounds are white people told to be "allies" and to reject white supremacy?

Overwhelmingly, white people are told to reject racism on moral grounds. It is evil to claim superiority to other people on no grounds but skin color—to get advantages not because of your merits but because of your race—to even passively support the violent suppression of People of Color by the police—to keep people out of your schools, neighborhoods, and job sites, because they do not look like you, etc. All this contradicts the democratic ethos of "*All men [people] are created equal*," and religious teachings of the equality and infinite worth of all children of God.

These moral claims are essential. They motivate people to care for more than just themselves and to be ashamed to tolerate oppression in their midst. But morality is not enough. Love is not enough. Nothing is enough. It is also necessary to appeal to self-interest, to show the overlap between moral claims and self-interest. Only a combination can keep people going through thick and thin, struggling for justice, freedom, and equality—for themselves and for everyone. People of Color have both self-interest and moral justice on their side. What about European-Americans?

White people are not oppressed as white people. As white people they have privileges, they benefit from being of European descent. Even anti-racist individuals benefit from being part of the collective of white people, if only indirectly, because they are not People of Color. There is an argument that even oppressors pay a price in narrowness of vision, rigidity of personality, and emotional limitations. There is truth in this, but it does not contradict the key point that white people, as white people, are a privileged layer of society.

There are sections of the left which have focused on this point, on the benefits which European-Americans receive from racism, however limited, which they refer to as “white skin privilege.” They call on white workers to sacrifice for the sake of People of Color. Perhaps unfortunately, this moralistic appeal has a limited appeal; people will not easily give up their families’ incomes and benefits for the sake of morality only.

Capitalism is an Enemy

But white people are not just white people. They have occupations, genders, religions, sexual orientations, social interests, and other aspects of their lives. In particular, the big majority are in the working class. They work for a living, getting wages or salaries, obeying bosses, producing the goods and services which make the world go round. They rely on their incomes to support their families (including children and full-time homemakers) as well as to pay for entertainment, education, and social activities. Those who do not have paying jobs mostly seek to get them.

As members of the working class, the big majority has interests which clash with the boss class, the ruling rich. The capitalists. are supported by their agents, such as the politicians, and—especially—the police. Without the police how could the rich keep working people from taking over the factories, the offices, the mansions, and the rest of the wealth-making infrastructure? In a society full of class conflicts, clashes of interests, and competition, how could society be held together without police, and a brutal police at that? (Not that reforms cannot be won, but the police cannot be abolished in this society.)

As I write, people in the U.S.A., of all races and ethnicities, are suffering from the coronavirus plague. They are also living through the severe economic downturn which the plague triggered (but which will last even after covid-19 is “under control”). There is also the looming effects of the climate and ecological crisis (floods, hurricanes, droughts, overheating, etc., etc.). All this being exacerbated by a racist, incompetent, and unhinged political leadership. This combination of disasters is the background for the BLM movement. Outrage at these mishandled calamities has fueled a militancy on all sorts of overlapping issues—consider the demonstrations supporting Black transsexuals.

All these evils are caused by—or at least made worse by—capitalism. It is capitalism which pushed industrial agriculture and urbanism deep into wildlife territories in poorer nations, leading to the rise of plagues—and then spreading them through overcentralized world transportation. And failing to deal with them due to underfunded public health services. It is capitalism, whose system has been declining overall since the 1970s, setting the world up for new and deeper recessions. It is capitalism whose incessant drive for accumulation, growth, and profit-making, overrides the ecological need for a balanced and sustainable environment—and is creating the global climate catastrophe. It is capitalism which needs women to serve as breeders and family caretakers, in order to create and re-create the labor power of the workers—and therefore prevents full gender equality. It is capitalism which has evolved the current political situation, with a vile and inept “conservative” (really semi-fascist) president. He is being challenged by a “moderate” (really conservative) politician who is rather inept himself—a dreadful choice. This is the result of decades of political decline which has reflected the economic decline of U.S. and world capital.

Just as it is capitalism which has created and maintains racism, so it is capitalism which created and maintains the exploitation and oppression of white workers, as well as women, and LGBTQ people, people subject to viral pandemics, and people who are in danger from global overheating. It is not as “white people” that they suffer, in any but a moral sense. It is as working class, women, plague victims, and so on that white people are oppressed and exploited—by capitalism. To fight capitalism it is necessary to oppose racism, which remains one of its main props and supports. The failure to oppose white supremacy has repeatedly been the Achilles heel of other struggles for social improvement, leading to their defeat.

The capitalists do not want working people, of any race, ethnicity, or nationality, to see the enemy as capitalism, its ruling class, and its state (with its police). They want us to think that “we’re all in this together,” we should all love each other, the only issue is being “woke” and morally responsible, and so on. Businesses can take out all the ads they want, in order to impress Black people that they are on their side. But they cannot change their basic practices. They will not raise the incomes of the majority of People of Color, with higher wages and better public services. They will not increase their taxes to pay for a vast expansion of health care and for guaranteed jobs for all. (After all, they have just benefitted from an enormous tax cut, pushed through by the Republicans and Trump.) They will not slash the military budget in order to pay for increased spending on public schools. (How then could they threaten countries around the world with the military might of the U.S.?) They will not implement a “Green New Deal,” to save humanity from a climate cataclysm. This too would need more taxes, socializing of major industries, cutting back military spending, and reorganizing the whole system. So they would prefer to talk about moral values and the goodness of racial equality in the abstract.

What is needed is not an abstract set of values but a vision of a different and better society, where all are free and equal, where the economy is democratically managed by its workers, and production is carried out for use rather than profit. In such a society, people organize themselves into voluntary self-managed associations, and protect themselves through community institutions.

People of European descent have important reasons to oppose white supremacy, both as racist prejudice and as an institutional system. There is a moral need to be better than we have been, to support all people’s value as free and equal. But like Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous people, white people also have an objective self-interest in opposing racism. Not as white people as such, but because racism is used to prop up capitalism, which is a basis for the exploitation and oppression of everyone.

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