

League of Revolutionaries for a New America

Basic Education for New Members

Class V Race in America:
A Changing but Central Question

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**Race in America:
A Changing, but Central Question**

We stand at the edge of the most revolutionary of times. Profound social changes, driven forward by changes in the economy, are opening a window of opportunity that allows us to make up for the past half-century of stagnation. As in previous moments of great change, some revolutionaries become stuck and are unable to move forward with changing times. That mud is theoretical confusion. This confusion arises when revolutionaries hold to unchanging doctrine or theory while disregarding constantly changing facts. The unending fight for clarity is precisely the effort to keep theory and doctrine united with and reflecting the facts of a constantly changing world.

Today it is broadly accepted that humanity has entered a period of epochal change. The fundamental changes in the production and distribution of the means of life compel all social relations and formations to change accordingly. Such change isn't simply the destruction of the old and introduction of the new. It is a complex process involving changing relationships of form and content and of quantity and quality. Such a period demands a leadership capable of understanding and working with social motion in transition. In America today, the rapidly growing mass movement is dangerously compromised by a lack of such clarity. Quantitative changes in the economy are incremental, but as they accumulate, they force social changes that appear suddenly, and as crisis. Social ideas do not evolve as a reflection of the evolution of the economy. The ruling class will not allow them to. The old ideas serve a very important role as a reactionary counterbalance to the emergence of revolutionary new ideas. Such old ideas, the hangovers from previous periods, have played a very special role in disorienting radical movements in our country. There is much we must learn from history in this regard.

At the center of these old ideas is the political concept of race and how to deal with it. The question of race was the central issue in preventing the American people from achieving their goals in the Revolutionary War. Those goals, enshrined in our documents of the Revolution, were unattainable for the mass of white toilers while a quarter of the working class was in chains. The question of race was central to frustrating the popular aims of the Civil War. Before abandoning the goal of breaking the political back of the planters, the American people first had to abandon the vision, "And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea." Playing the race card did this. The question of race was also the central issue that prevented the breakout of the union movement in the 1930s and 40s. There was no way to advance and secure the unions without organizing the South. The unions could not or would not take this step. The alternative was to create the conditions for the trade unions to become something akin to a labor front and an appendage of the State Department. Revolutionaries and people of good will fought every step of the way, but the lack of understanding of the political, rather than biological, nature of the race question led to their defeat.

As we enter this new epoch of transformation, the race question again presents itself as a changing but central question. This time we dare not fail. Racism in America has been directed against the Irish, the Native Americans, the Latin Americans, and the Asians,

among others. Most of all it has centered on the African Americans, because it is a political question. Politics, it has been written, is the art of the class struggle. Nothing could be more artful than to use a myth to convince literally millions of people to do harm to themselves in the interests of the people they are struggling against. Yet this is precisely what has happened in our history. It happened because the American people became convinced that they were dealing with a biological rather than a political question. We emphasize this point because the great economic and political changes taking place are having a profound effect on the politics of race and color. First, let us look at the African-American community.

One of the ideological hangovers from the period of segregation is the tendency to see African Americans as a category rather than a scattered grouping of some 40 million individuals who have different histories, ideals, and goals and who belong to various economic classes. Today there is no such thing as the African-American "people." This characterization was correct years ago when the pressure of segregation isolated the African Americans from the rest of society. This isolation allowed for the creation of a common culture, internal class stratification, and a common political agenda. As the economic basis of segregation weakened, so did the social and political cohesiveness of the African-American community.

To the degree that segregation weakened, the African-American community, as such, disintegrated. As possibilities developed, the better-situated Black upper class moved away from the "ghetto" and became a part of the Anglo-American bourgeoisie. In the main, they continue to pander to the Black masses, since they still need a social base for their economic and social advancement. Actually, the two classes have little in common, and both sides are accelerating the drift toward class orientation. A broad strata of civil, military, and police officers, and corporate, educational, and government officials are Black, giving the impression that there is an end to segregation, and the struggle around class has taken the place of the struggle around race. Some revolutionaries hold to the idea that race is still the predominant factor. Others are dropping the question of race and declaring that the today there is only the question of class. Race and racism are political weapons to facilitate class exploitation and should never be placed in opposition to class. It is not a question of either/or. Both factors are at play, and the question is which factor predominates under what circumstance, and in which direction the general motion is going.

There is no question that the old-style segregation and lynch-mob form of racism has declined. Race is a political factor and must change its form to function in changing circumstance. Today, the salient aspect of the social struggle is the intensifying war against the new proletarian class created by electronics. For historical reasons, the most vulnerable sector is Black. The draconian slashing of the so-called safety net has been accomplished by presenting it as a Black thing. The attacks against education and health care are always carefully couched in terms of race. This political maneuvering is taking place within the reality of a growing social consciousness within this new proletarian class. The ruling class cannot abandon the weapon of race, since it is historically evolved and an integral part of American politics. While remaining fully conscious of the viability of the race question, we revolutionaries concentrate on the question of class, which is the arising and progressive aspect.

There has never been a complete separation of the workers according to color. The decline of the racial designation of work and the commonality of unemployment is creating opportunities for class solidarity on an entirely new level. Previously, what unity there was, was built around common problems in the factory shop. Today we can speak of building class unity – something far beyond workplace problems and in the arena of political struggle. In summary, political struggle is an art. It requires more than an adherence to theory or doctrine. It requires the ability to sum up, to make decisions on the basis of the temporary relationship of subjective and objective forces. This is nowhere more true than in the effort to unite the historically disparate sectors of the new, revolutionary class.

Discussion

1. How has race played a central role in disorienting radical movements in the U.S.? Discuss historical examples such as the Civil War, and the situation today.
2. What is the difference between addressing race as a biological question and addressing it as a political question?
3. Discuss the relationship between race and class today.
4. Discuss: "The decline of the racial designation of work and the commonality of unemployment is creating opportunities for class solidarity on an entirely new level. Previously, what unity there was, was built around common problems in the factory shop. Today we can speak of building class unity – something far beyond workplace problems and in the arena of political struggle." How is the material basis for racism being eroded?