

**Racism, Classism and Worker Injustice:  
A Historical Wagging Tail**

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During a recent discourse I had with participants in an anti-racism training, a commonly expressed disagreement about the primacy of class over race quickly emerged. When urged to consider the reality of racism as a powerfully defining force of domination and control in the United States, several people purported that the condition of inequity in this country is fundamentally about classism, not racism. And if we could destroy or completely overhaul our capitalist, corporation labor-centric way of life in this country, then all people would have the ability to work, live and act together in right relationship.

Though tongue biting was my first instinct, I must admit that I don't *entirely* disagree with the argument raised by not just these particular anti-racism training participants, but by many folk in this country. I have no doubt as an anti-racism organizer that the anti-class and worker justice movement is part of rehumanizing a society deeply rooted in abuse, control, exploitation, and economic colonialism. However, objections do arise when the essential binding factor of injustice in the United States centralizes only around definitions and experiences of classism, devoid of a critical understanding of the ways in which racism also shapes the institutions and systems in our society. This essentialist viewpoint of "class only" can be the blinders we wear despite the fact that we live very much in a race-based society. Rinku Sen, publisher of ColorLines magazine and director of the Applied Research Center, describes this inability to connect both dots by saying,

"Most of the issues we're dealing with in low-income communities of color and marginalized communities are about a combination of race and class... [Yet a class lens can often get used to the exclusion of others:] People tend to start with race and class and end up only with class. I see that much more than people starting with race and class and ending up only with race" ("Grantmaking with a Racial Equity Lens," p 7, Grantcraft, [www.grantcraft.org](http://www.grantcraft.org)).

So how do we stitch together both anti-racism and anti-class movement work without assuming that the respective narratives displace one another, or that one ultimately trumps the other? What would the creation of a unified and multi-faceted movement require of us collectively and individually? These are the questions we must be asking ourselves and one another, seeking constantly to understand that any anti-oppression work is about the restoration of a people poisoned by historically created propaganda which govern our lives.

To begin shaping the possibility of unified movement work, it is critical that we learn history. It is not unusual that many of us might recoil from such a suggestion, especially given the way we learn rote lessons on history in our educational system. I grew up believing that history was only about memorizing wars, generals, and battle sites. Further squelching our historical explorations, most of us have been shaped in the ahistorical waters of this nation, waters in which we can't hardly remember what newsworthy things happened yesterday – much less what life altering events occurred 100, 300, or 500 years ago.

In my adult life I've come to understand history as something living and breathing, and that it has an inexorable amount to teach me about who we are today living in this place we call the United States. History is the vivid technicolor imagery of people's lived experiences, both those who conquered and

those who were conquered. History's incantations tell us about why we experience what we do today, and can give us a view into effective strategies for societal change and transformation.

Understanding the animated history by which we were created (and which we continue creating every day) requires an adept and critical reading – not just with eyes and lips, but with our ears. It's a bit like putting your ear to ground, straining to hear the thundering hooves of a galloping equine herd many miles away. Only this kind of deep and intense listening to history can reveal the values, patterns, and oppressively normative ways of life in the United States. It is also in this way that we find the historical reasons behind the belief held by some that the injustice problem in this country is solely about class, and not about race.

One of many valuable stories that lends unifying insight to labor and anti-racism organizers takes place not in recent history, but in 17<sup>th</sup> century colonial Virginia. In the early to mid-1600s, persons in bondage included not only what we commonly understand as slaves from the African continent, but the workforce also held enslaved Native peoples and indentured European and African servants. In fact (and perhaps historically surprising to some), the first African laborers were brought to the "New World" in 1619 as indentured servants, and were expected to serve as their European counterparts before becoming freemen.

Given our current overarching national experience of divisiveness and backbiting between whites and people of color, colonial Virginia was a curious time in this country regarding race and class. This was a time in U.S. history when whites and people of color worked side by side, toiling through the same back-breaking labor and answering to the same elitist overseers. It was also a time of shared identity, one shaped by membership in a group whose existence was used to maintain the wealth held by only a few ruling whites. Regardless of color or racial identity, all bond laborers were at this time subjected to the same rebuke and indignities from colonists in power.

It must be noted that this multiracial work force didn't just labor together. Workers (particularly Blacks and Whites) also fraternized with one another, cohabitated, and intermarried. It is historically evident that interracial families abounded at this time, and that the highly contested lines of race and white superiority had not yet been fully codified in the colonies. It was this very consorting and socializing of workers in bondage that ultimately led to the rise of white supremacy and its role in dividing both labor and racial justice movements.

Bacon's Rebellion, one of the most important worker revolts in our nation's history, took place in 1676 in Virginia Colony. Nathaniel Bacon, a white frontiersman, led the charge against the government and its leadership. Dissatisfied with the poorly legislated protection provided to white settlers against the ever present danger of Native peoples, Bacon, along with hundreds of other landless whites, bore arms and engaged in mutiny. This revolting assemblage vowed to guard itself against indigenous retaliation and do what white elites would not do for them.

(Before continuing with the historical recitation of Bacon's Rebellion, it is important to pause and listen to all the whispers of history. Although the beginnings of this rebellion would lead to some of the most powerful organizing between bonded white laborers and laborers of color, we ought to be attuned to the fact that, even in its very inception, this resistance movement was one deeply rooted in the colonial and imperialistic culture of our nation's first founding. Howard Zinn inquires,

"Were those frontier Virginians resentful that the politicians and landed aristocrats who controlled the colony's government in Jamestown first pushed them westward into Indian territory, and then seemed indecisive in fighting the Indians? That might explain the character of their rebellion, not easily classifiable as either anti-aristocrat or anti-Indian, because it was both" (Zinn, [A People's History of the United States](#), p 40).

In the instance of Bacon's Rebellion, had poor white frontiersmen not first laid claim to the Manifest Destiny driven theft of Native land and the governmental protection to do so, it may have taken many more years for a collective class-based movement across racial and ethnic lines to foment.)

In an act that further threatened the social order of Virginia colony, Black people began joining Bacon in the rebellion against the ruling elite, culminating in approximately 2000 Black workers and 4000 White workers burning Jamestown to the ground. Although first considered bonded laborers akin to their European cohorts, by 1676, however, the movement towards life-long servitude plagued African and Black communities and differed greatly from the continued indentured servitude for nearly all European workers. Although one might be led to believe that this difference in labor assignment would have been destructive, it proved to point out that Blacks likely had an even greater stake in the transformation of the aristocracy. For Whites, winning the rebellion would mean no more 10-year terms of service; for Blacks, winning the rebellion would mean no more life-long terms of service.

What was the ruling class to do? Although historically unwilling to relate to the plebian working class whites in the colonies, it also became clear that any unified resistance between poor people of all stripes would naturally end in a power coup. In addition to destroying the regime of Virginia colony, a revolutionary worker movement also put at stake the economic viability of the colonial United States, jeopardizing means of production, dispensation, and inexpensive (or free) labor.

Whites in power acted swiftly, choosing strategies for dividing the multiracial worker rebellion based on two things: one, maintaining the cheapness of labor by enforcing class; and two, preserving the pool of available and exploitable cheap labor by enforcing race. Combining the dynamics of both race and class, the ruling elite methodically and quickly succeeded in dividing and conquering the formerly collectivized resistance. Governmental importation of European indentured servants declined sharply in an effort to minimize the poor white working class, while the slave industry reached an alarming frenzy in order to maximize the accessible pool of chattel labor. In doing this, these early colonial leaders concretized the labor movement as we presently experience it today: fractured and injured along the racial fault line.

Utilizing race and class allowed ruling white elites to say to poor whites, "You have more in common with *us* than you do with *them*." Poor whites began experiencing relative labor elevation within the context of chattel slavery. Indentured and landless whites received workplace promotions, leading to such things as becoming the foremen of slave gangs, receiving the ability to mete out punishment against any slave with impunity, disrupting all signs of Native or Black insurrection, and having the ability to take any item (be it animal or material) belonging to Black and Native people to be used to benefit "the poor" (i.e., themselves).

But the *pièce de resistance* of the conquer and divide strategy of white superiority pinnacled when the once poor, downtrodden, and persecuted white laborers could now hope for what Emily Drew, professor of Sociology and Ethnic Studies, calls "the promise of Whiteness," and the unification of all whites under a some kind of shared culture. The zenith of the "promise of Whiteness" solidified when formerly maligned whites could themselves dream of one day receiving a governmentally sanctioned swag of land, munitions, and a slave. Herein we can see that rights and privileges granted to whites only leads us into the deep divisions of race and racism in the United States, and in so it creates the assumption that Whites ought to have advantages and rights over and above those identified as non-White.

The story of Bacon's Rebellion is a long and complicated one, and may present as doldrums. However, if we remain ever diligent in our critical and careful rumination about history, I suspect a great deal of conflict between current anti-class and anti-racism transformation organizing appears crystalline – so long as we understand that history is the tail wagging our movement dog.

The state of struggle at hand between class and race is merely the repetition of a tried and true strategy that divided poor whites and people of color, while simultaneously conquering both. It does not surprise me, nor should it surprise any historically learned revolutionary, that the patterns of fissure and separation in our anti-class and anti-racism movements are resounding reverberations of the convoluted play we were destined to act out centuries ago.

Labor historian and white activist David Roediger contends “that the assumption remains, even as the issue of race is raised, that the [worker of color] enters the story of American labor as an actor in a subplot which can be left on the cutting room floor, probably without vitiating the main story. What if race is instead part of the very lens through which labor’s story must be filmed?” (“For Asian American Workers...”, Asian Pacific Labor Association of Evergreen State College, 2007). Contextually, this suggestion allows us organizers to see the interplay of oppressions, a vision that serves only to better equip us in exciting change in our respective areas of expertise.

Last year I facilitated an anti-racism training in Appalachian Tennessee with a community environmental action group. As I listened to the stories of the people, I heard echos from the race/class canyon ricocheting off the walls. Both People of Color and Whites talked about the rampant corporate and commercial divestment in the community, leaving many without work and in fear of not being able to provide homes, food, and health care for their children and elders. The conversation, however, rapidly degraded into a blame game, with finger pointing by whites whose jobs were recently outsourced to people of color overseas or domestically underbid to poor people of color. Actors in a pre-ordained dialogue, these white people were merely repeating the lines fed to all of us about the causal problem of unemployment and underemployment: that it rests squarely on the shoulders of people of color here and abroad. And it’s people of color, not whites or white controlled corporations, who threaten the mythological stability of whiteness in the United States.

Though undermining their best interests by doing so, I heard in these white people the inclination to align with the white elite of this country, both in government and industry, rather than with other disenfranchised and colonized peoples. Whites in power no more have social or human interest in the white working class than they do in people of color, unless and until poor whites are beneficial to the advancement of white elites. The socializing farce of white unity and the demonization of People of Color are so deeply woven into the fabric of our society as to transform our very collective and individual identities. These waltzing fabrications of white superiority and people of color’s inferiority combine into a poisonous brew that, once drunk, ignites blindness and the inability to see related societal puppeteering and dehumanization.

We cannot, as resisters of the racist and classist status quo, stand aside, knowingly nodding our heads because we now “get it,” or because we consider ourselves schooled about U.S. hegemony. How must we be clear enough about race and class in order to assist all poor people in understanding the ways whites and people of color are being bamboozled to benefit and shore a white racist and classist system? As movement leaders, it is our responsibility to speak with all parts and people of the movement – in their current iteration and the iteration we envision. We are the ones who must know how to navigate the treacherous seas between race and class, articulating that yes, whites of all classes have some kind of white privilege while poor whites are used to reinforce the racist class structure. Parallel for people of color is the ever vigilant understanding that yes, all people of color suffer in some way from white supremacy while middle- and upper-class people of color are used to reinforce the classist race structure.

Our aptitude to articulate the ways race and class reinforce one another calls us into account around two components of societal change:

First, we must be able to fully contextualize our transformation work. A view for racial justice can be applied in conjunction with other views of oppression, just as a view for economic justice can do similarly. Making salient the points of intersection reveals to organizers how and when race and class (and, really, any other form of institutionalized oppression) converge. As motivators and agitators, our capacity to identify and organize around multiple issues can be the avenue that provides for deeper, stronger, and wider strategies for change.

The counsel to understand and see through the prism of oppressions may feel a bit unnerving. Historically, it has not been uncommon for full blown anti-oppression based movements to become a dilution of all work surrounding any specific manifestation of institutionalized oppression. A general anti-oppression approach often becomes a watered down version of justice, leaving no clear start or end point, and making nebulous organizing tactics that are perceived as too broad or too narrow. By biting off more organizing than any of us can chew, we jeopardize the integrity of all justice work.

The call to change workers, then, revolves around the imperative understanding of oppression as not just singularly institutional or individual, but endemic to the interrelated systems of dominance in the United States. This is the photo that affords the full panorama, and lends us the ability to see and experience all our relative places in the struggle for racial and worker justice. It is in this way of maintaining the integrity of each revolutionary piece that our stories do not displace one another, and in fact only make clearer what each part of the movement has to say.

The racist lie that tells us the overarching, normalizing metanarrative of white superiority shapes all our behavior, and even has the power to misshape the movements we engage in that are designed to fight against this same beast. In the labor organizing milieu, white supremacy has the tendency to universalize the white worker experience as the experience of all workers, rather than name it as one experience of worker injustice dually formed within the context of white power and privilege. Unless we comprehend this reality, our worker justice constructs, rehumanizing belief systems, and organizing approaches will inherently carry a bias for whiteness and the white experience as it is lived today. Lifting the veil off this truth allows space for the myriad colonial, economic, social, and race-based perspectives of workers of all racial backgrounds. Such transparency can also illustrate how the interrelatedness of racism and classism is not simply an unsavory social behavior, but a product of the inherent values and culture of our society.

The second of two invaluable components of social change in regard to the interplay of race and class demands individual evaluation of ourselves and the ways in which each of us has been shaped to explicitly and complicity engage in and/or benefit from the racist, classist status quo. As radical and revolutionary organizers, singers, dancers, poets, caregivers, and teachers, we are subjected to the same repeating soundtrack of white supremacy just as any others in the United States. We don't live in some kind of utopia, hidden in a mountain commune and hermetically sealed away from the realities of our society.

Our downfall as activists is that we often shirk self-scrutiny, accountability, and responsibility. The continuing injustice problem is almost always about some else's bias, prejudice, ignorance, or misguided use of power. Should any of us here be scratching this "it's-not-about-me" itch, I encourage you to consider aborting this mission now. If we are engaged in changing society without the admission that we – yes, even *we* justice organizers – have also been taught and raised to take in and act out the racist and classist messages instilled in us through family, peers, school, and media, we will no doubt find ourselves living into roles of superiority and inferiority regardless of our intentions. This is the way of socializing forces that function virtually like runaway trains in this country. This is also the way dominant cultures nourish and regenerate themselves.

As an organizer of color, my own indicting socializing behavior orbits not so much around race (since I clearly experience myself as a victim and not a benefactor of white supremacy), but around how class and income level have come to shape my behaviors. In some way or another, all of us are socialized into many levels and forms of relative privilege. Though I may know the perils of white racism and my related internalized oppression, I also must be honest about how my ability to access housing, health care, transportation, and education shapes who am I just as profoundly as my oppression as a woman of color shapes my identity.

Should I as an organizer fail to step into the ownership of my place in the matrix of oppression, I will without a doubt act upon all of my learned ways of being, oozing out my own social predispositions despite my desire not to do so. Deliberation, intentionality, and the reshaping of one's own internalized societal norms are all that can change the deeply embedded beliefs created in us, much of it done without our permission – and sometimes even without our cognition.

Each of us is endowed with the ability to participate in and create astounding human change. However, each of us also risks falling victim to the hazards and crevasses of “oppression olympics,” and the infighting that a siloed slant imbues. This misdirected fight for social primacy is precisely what drives the wedge even deeper between class justice and racial justice. We are accountable both for the socialized baggage we bring to the work, and the strategies for shedding that ballast and replacing it with radical, unified identity.

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