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Race Traitors Wanted

Apply Within (A Review of David Gilbert's "Looking at the U.S. White Working Class Historically")

Colin Jenkins

February 28, 2018

The term "white working class" captured much of the media analysis which sought to explain Trump's meteoric rise and subsequent victory to the highest office in the United States. The obsession with polling and voting trends based in demographics is certainly nothing new. Mainstream political analysts exist for the purpose of figuring out why Republicans dominate the South, or why Democrats maintain strongholds on the coasts, or why so-called swing states go one way or the other in any given year. But this time around seemed especially interesting, considering that a wealthy businessman (and political outsider) received 63 million votes from a populace that is facing historic economic woes due to the constant greed and manipulation of and by wealthy businessmen.

For the past forty years, some voting trends have remained incredibly consistent. In terms of race, Blacks highly favor Democratic candidates by an overwhelming margin that rests between 74 and 88 points. In contrast, whites consistently favor Republican candidates by margins of up to 25 points. This trend stayed true

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for Trump, with whites preferring him by a 21-point margin and Blacks favoring Clinton by an 80-point margin.

The intersection of race and class presents a more complex picture, with more fluidity. Both capitalist parties know this. And they also know that, while they ultimately represent the elite/special interests that fund their campaigns and lobby their legislation, they need votes from the "common people." This is the game of bourgeois/liberal democracy in the US: the two parties participate in a political tug of war, we watch and are even allowed to passively participate with a vote, and many of us choose to participate with the faith that our vote actually matters. Regardless of their worth to us, votes do determine which party takes power. And, because of this, the parties deploy ample amounts of resources to capture these votes.

The parties develop strategies to attract not only individual voters, but specific demographics: women, men, "Hispanic," Black, white, "educated," Christian, etc. Each party uses complex marketing and advertising schemes to push agendas and play with psyches, in the hopes of securing large swaths of votes come election time. Patterns and trends develop, and analyses follow in an attempt to explain why certain voters vote the way they do. One conclusion from liberal analysts that has persisted for nearly a half-century is that the "white working class" votes against its own economic interests by siding with Republicans.

A common question, like this one posed in a December-2017 Politico article , asks, "Are working-class white voters shooting themselves in the foot by making common cause with a political movement [Republicans] that is fundamentally inimical to their economic self-interest?" This, of course, is based on the premise that whenever in power, the alternate choice (Democrats) has shown the propensity and capacity to improve or sustain the economic realities of working-class people: a premise that, by any historical measure, appears weak. Nonetheless, the question persists within liberal circles: why do poor and working-class

a formidable counter-attack in a class war that up until now has been a one-sided massacre. But, as Gilbert so wisely tells us,

"Class consciousness cannot be defined solely by economic demands. At its heart, it is a movement toward the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. 'Proletarian internationalism' - solidarity with all other peoples oppressed and exploited by imperialism - is a necessary and essential feature of revolutionary class consciousness." For white radicals, "this requires up front support for, and alliance with, the oppressed nations, particularly those within the US (Black, Mexicano, Native). Thus white supremacy and class consciousness cannot peacefully co-exist with each other. One chokes off the other. An honest view of the 350-year history clearly shows that the alignment with white supremacy has predominated over revolutionary class consciousness." (38)

Defaulting to class struggle as a one-size-fits-all strategy will not suffice. A neutral approach to white supremacy and imperialism, even if under the guise of revolutionary class politics, is siding with white supremacy and imperialism. White radicals must do this housework and then proceed to the white working class, which has largely been forsaken. In closing, Gilbert leaves us with a sober assessment: "In my view, there definitely is a white working class. It is closely tied to imperialism; the labor aristocracy is the dominant sector, the class as a whole has been corrupted by white supremacy; but, the class within the oppressor nation that lives by the sale of their labor power has not disappeared." (39)

There is revolutionary potential there. As white radicals, it is our duty to find a way to tap it.

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(75) and the mass mobilization that has occurred to combat Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) assaults on immigrant communities since Trump took office.

This window of revolutionary potential has been opened by a historical crisis of the capitalist system, which is now starting to fail significant portions of the white working class in the US; therefore rendering past class collaborations null and void. As this window also opens the possibility of a fascist tide, some of which we have begun to see in the wake of the Trump phenomenon, Gilbert desperately calls on white radicals to seize the moment:

"We white radicals have a particular responsibility and crying need to organize as many white people as possible to break from imperialism and to see that their long-term interests, as human beings and for a livable future for their children, lie in allying with the rest of humanity." (70)

This effort, according to Gilbert, must rely less on abstract theories and more on concrete points of intersection that fall outside the narrow scope of the white working class. Focusing on protecting water, increasing wages, acquiring healthcare, improving education, fighting debt schemes, opposing constant wars, opposing police brutality, and battling environmental degradation are a few examples of possible intersections.

Ultimately, the challenge is to "find a way to get across to white working-class people the most fundamental issues: the only way to achieve a humane and sustainable society is by allying with the Global South and people of color." (70) And this must be done by *actually interacting* with the white working class, thus shedding "the elitist or perhaps defeatist view that dismisses the possibility of organizing significant numbers of white people, particularly working-class whites" (2), something that organizations like Red-Neck Revolt and John Brown Gun Club have already begun to do.

Class consciousness is sorely needed in the US, in order to recognize the bipartisan nature of capitalist politics and mount

whites vote for the party of Jim Crow, the Southern Strategy, personal responsibility, and ultra-capitalism.

The Radical Dilemma Posed by the White Working Class

While the capitalist parties formulate strategies for votes, revolutionaries continue to operate within the margins of society. In many ways, the same issues and questions that influence mainstream political parties also must be confronted by radicals. Among the Left (anti-capitalist/not Democrats or liberals!) in the US, the issue of the "white working class" takes on an even deeper meaning, presenting an age-old challenge of how to convince poor and working-class whites to let go of their whiteness for the sake of anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, working-class unity.

To many leftists, the challenge is a constant frustration that sparks many internal debates. Some take an optimistic approach in their analysis by claiming that the Trump vote was more middle class than working class; that proto-fascist groups like the Tea Party were predominantly middle class, and not working class; that fascist groups which have surfaced in the age of Trump are more middle class than working class. This optimism also drifts into semantics, where the term "working-class whites" is deemed more suitable than "white working class," which seems totalizing and monolithic to a fault. While, admittedly, the final Trump vote represented a mix of class dynamics, including a strong turnout from middle-class and small-business-owning whites, one statistic can't be ignored: Among all white voters making less than \$30,000 a year, 58% chose Trump.

Enter David Gilbert. Or rather, re-enter David Gilbert. During a time of white allies checking their privilege and seeking gold stars through self-flagellation and virtue signaling, Gilbert is a white accomplice who is nearing his fifth decade of a 75-years-to-life prison sentence. A former member of Students for a Democratic Society and the Weather Underground, Gilbert spent the late 70s and early 80s in the Revolutionary Armed Task Force (RATF), an alliance of white revolutionaries that served under the leadership of the Black

Liberation Army (BLA). On October 20, 1981, after an attempted robbery of a Brinks armored car which resulted in the deaths of two police officers, members of the BLA and RATF, including Gilbert, were arrested and subsequently found guilty on charges stemming from the incident. Gilbert has been incarcerated in the NY State prison system ever since.

In 1984, Gilbert penned a short book from his prison cell, titled, "Looking at the White Working Class Historically." The book was an attempt to analyze the white working class in the US in order to gauge historical obstructions to, and potential for, its participation in revolutionary struggle. In 2017, on the heels of Trump's rise, which signifies in part, "racist mass mobilizations" in response to "an imperialism in crisis," and a precursor to "fascism," according to Gilbert, a second edition of "Looking..." was rolled out by Kersplebeid Publishing. The new edition includes Gilbert's original analysis of three texts - *White Supremacy in the US: Slavery and the Origins of Racism* (Ted Allen); *Black Reconstruction 1860-1880* (W.E.B. Du Bois); and *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat* (J. Sakai) - a section on *Lessons from the Sixties* (1991), and new sections on *The Context of the Trump Phenomenon* (2017) and *After the Sixties: Reaction and Restructuring* (2017).

The original preface remains, both in print and in relevance, as Gilbert opens the book by pinpointing the historical dilemma at hand:

"One of the supreme issues for our movement is summed-up in the contradictions of the term 'white working class.' On one hand there is the class designation that should imply, along with all other workers of the world, a fundamental role in the overthrow of capitalism. On the other hand, there is the identification of being part of a ('white') oppressor nation. Historically, we must admit that the identity with the oppressor nation has been primary." (1)

Leading up to the analysis of the texts by Allen, Du Bois, and Sakai, Gilbert hits "white radicals, to whom this book is primarily addressed," (8) with a hard-hitting historical critique of the white

tain segregation and Jim Crow in situations where Afrikan labor was numerically lesser and weak. Integration and segregation were but two aspects of the same settler hegemony." (35)

By combining historical developments, structural analyses, the works of Allen, Du Bois and Sakai, and specific lessons from the sixties, Gilbert offers somewhat of a blueprint for the anti-capitalist struggle ahead. Allen's contribution on *White Supremacy in the US* offers hope in the form of early plantation labor, which showed that "when Black and white labor were in the same conditions of servitude, there was a good deal of solidarity," so much so that "a system of white supremacy was consciously constructed" by the owning class:

"It was the bourgeoisie's deliberately contrived policy of differentiation between white and Black labor through the system of white skin privileges for white labor that allowed the bourgeoisie to use the poor whites as an instrument of social control over the Black workers." (21)

In slight contrast to both Du Bois and Sakai, Allen packages white supremacy as a conscious and deliberate construction used by elites to create artificial divisions within the working class. Thus suggesting that if it is in fact a conspiracy from above, it can be dismantled from below; or, as Gilbert puts it: "A system of white supremacy that was historically constructed can be historically deconstructed." (49)

A Window of Revolutionary Potential

Piggy-backing on Allen's optimism, Gilbert suggests that we have entered a window of revolutionary potential in the US, providing examples of cross-racial solidarity among the working class: "organizing efforts of home healthcare workers, campaigns for farm workers, Justice for Janitors, and the fight for a \$15/hour minimum wage" (72); the solidarity that was shown in Standing Rock, where white military veterans joined the fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline; the recent display of international solidarity between Black Lives Matter and the Palestinian people;

would use the Black vote to trample on their class aspirations... (3) Petty bourgeois whites still wanted to have cheap Black labor to exploit... (4) White labor was determined to keep Blacks from work that competed with them..., and (5) White labor, while given low wages, were compensated with social status, such as access to public parks, schools, etc." (29)

In recognizing the uniquely harsh struggles that exist within the non-white working class, Sakai's *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat* gives us perspective by "examining the relationship of the white proletariat to Native Americans, Mexicanos, and Asians, as well as the Black nation." (33) To a white radical like Gilbert, Sakai's book is especially striking... "Even for those of us who think we understand the white supremacist core of US history, reading *Settlers* is still quite an education." (33) By highlighting the US progression as being intimately tied to Native American genocide, the Atlantic Slave Trade, and imperialistic endeavors, Sakai shows that "integral to most advances of 'democratic' reform for white workers was an active consolidation of privileges at the expense of colonized Third World peoples." (33-34)

Sakai's overall thesis may be pessimistic, but it remains crucial for white radicals to consider. This may explain why Gilbert chose it as part of his examination. Ultimately, to Sakai, the US is quite simply "an oppressor nation that does not have a working class, in any politically meaningful sense of the term." (36) Rather, the "oppressor working class" (white working class) has merely secured gains through not only class collaboration, but also through white-supremacist and imperialist collaboration. Sakai hammers this notion home by pointing to specific tactics deployed by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) during the 1930s, which consciously "reinforced white monopolies on preferred jobs and was a loyal component of US imperial policy abroad" (36):

"The CIO's policy, then, became to promote integration under settler leadership where Afrikan labor was numerous and strong (such as the foundries, the meat packing plants, etc.) and to main-

working class as a tool of capitalism, white supremacy, and imperialism - a critique that is ripe for the seemingly rising number of class reductionists occupying the current Left. "White labor has been either a legal opposition within or an active component of the US imperial system," (1) Gilbert tells us, while concluding with a warning: "Blaming the working class is a misdirection; but so too is denialism about the depth and penetration of white supremacy, which has been the basis for the white Left's failures over the past 150 years." (10)

The Trump Phenomenon

In one of two sections exclusive to the 2017 edition, *The Context for the Trump Phenomenon*, Gilbert is especially penetrating with a systemic analysis regarding the factors leading to our current situation. Identifying the very foundation of the US as "white supremacy," Gilbert correctly views Trump as Americanism Personified; the inevitable result of a country that is, "at its core, imperialist, patriarchal, and based in a range of ways human beings are delimited and demeaned." (11) As both a historical norm for the country and a predictable systemic response, Gilbert points to "racial scapegoating" as Trump's engine:

"A stable imperialism prefers to rule by keeping the population passive, with large sectors at home placated by relative prosperity. But when the system is in crisis, those running the economy often resort to diverting anger by scapegoating the racial 'other.' The sectors of the population who buy into that get the 'satisfaction' of stomping on their 'inferiors,' which is a lot easier than confronting the mega-powerful ruling class." (11)

Echoing Buenaventura Durruti's assessment at the birth of the Spanish Civil War - "No government fights fascism to destroy it; when the bourgeoisie sees that power is slipping out of its hands, it brings up fascism to hold onto its privileges" - Gilbert captures the essence of fascism as capitalism in decay. But Gilbert's most important contribution in "Looking..." comes in his exposing of the modern Democratic Party as not only enablers of the Trump phe-

nomenon, but also as standard-bearers of this very system. In doing so, he indirectly answers the question so often posed within liberal circles. Gilbert sums up the Democrats' role:

"The Democrats, in blaming 'those damn Russkies,' are deflecting attention away from the real reason they lost: they represented the prevailing global capitalism and all the associated frustrations of the decline of US manufacturing and erosion of job security. Trump spoke to those anxieties - in a totally demagogic and dishonest way. For example, during the campaign he railed against Goldman Sachs as the prime example of how Wall Street banks screw the working man; then, as president he selected seven of his top economic appointments from the ranks of Goldman Sachs. The Democrats could not provide a compelling alternative to this racist scam artist because they too are deeply rooted in the long bipartisan history of white supremacy, capitalism, and wars of aggression." (12)

In comparing Trump's "more blatant racism and misogyny" to Obama's "kinder and more inclusive rhetoric," Gilbert concludes that Obama, the face of the Democratic Party and confidant of Hillary Clinton, "provided trillions of dollars to bail out Wall Street at the expense of Main Street... presided over seven wars (drone strikes have killed hundreds of civilians and are acts of war under international law)... deported a record number of immigrants... kept 6,000 people behind bars by opposing retroactive application of legislation that reduced harsh sentences for crack cocaine... and played a key role in sabotaging the 2009 Copenhagen Conference of Parties." (13)

Despite pointing out that "lesser evils" are becoming more and more difficult to identify, Gilbert concludes with a responsible assessment of the Trump phenomenon as "something new and particularly threatening... the way he has enlarged, energized, and emboldened an active and aggressive base for white supremacy" while making "immigrants, Muslims, Native-American water-protectors, Black Lives Matter activists, women who've faced sexual assault,

LGBTQ folks, those who can't afford health insurance, and more feel under the gun." (13)

Lessons for White Radicals

While Gilbert's book serves as a concise and insightful baseline analysis of systemic problems, something that is surely needed on the modern Left, its ultimate goal is really to help steer white radicals in the right direction. In this effort, Gilbert passes on his wisdom as a lifelong, revolutionary, white accomplice, seemingly pleading with us to avoid pitfalls of the past.

Gilbert's lesson essentially comes in three parts: Identifying the historical developments that have shaped the white working class in the US; recognizing the uniquely harsh struggles that exist within the non-white working class; and moving forward in a way that seeks to unite the US working class without reducing everything to class. Tricky proposals, indeed; but Gilbert lays the groundwork for tackling them.

In identifying the historical role of the white working class, Du Bois's assessment of the class and racial dynamics that played out in post-Civil War America (*Black Reconstruction 1860-1880*) is invaluable. For this reason, Gilbert spends an ample amount of time on it. The primary question posed by Du Bois was this: If only 7% of the white Southern population owned three quarters of the slaves, and 70% of Southern whites owned no slaves at all, why did the poor whites agree to police the slaves? Or more to the point, why did poor Southern whites agree to sign on as "shock troops for the mass terror that destroyed the gains of Black Reconstruction?" (31)

Du Bois provides many insights in his classic text, some of which leave Gilbert frustrated as "not being sufficiently materialist." (31) However, in the end, the value of Du Bois' work is that it illustrates the divisions that occurred between the white working class and the newly freed Black slaves - divisions that were rooted in an embrace of whiteness as a means of intra-working-class privileges: "(1) Poor whites were determined to keep Blacks from access to the better land... (2) Poor whites were afraid that the planters