

Developing A Cross-Race Class Consciousness

Strategies for BTR and NEFAC

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The debate between NEFAC and the national organization forming as a result of the “Bring the Ruckus” (BTR) statement has raised many important questions for anarchists as we try to make sense of racism, both as a specifically “American” concept, and internationally. This article is intended to bring to the discussion our thoughts and to hopefully fill in important gaps, bring to light some inherent contradictions, and find some commonalities, both with the BTR articles and with the NEFAC articles.

We have found that while BTR attempts to address institutionalized white supremacy as a step towards bringing about social revolution, we feel that their strategy and theory falls short in a number of ways. Specifically, there is little correlation between their theory and goals (abolishing the white race) and their day-to-day strategies and work (Copwatch, prison abolition, etc.). Further, their reliance on a hierarchy of oppressions, placing race at the top, serves to oversimplify the discourse around social revolution and ignores important connections between patriarchy, race, class, and capitalism. We also take issue with all participants in the debate as they have forgotten one important detail – in order to discuss political theories, there needs to be some common vocabulary.

DEFINITIONS

No one has spent any time trying to establish common definitions of “race,” “racism,” and “white supremacy.” Obviously we do not purport to have the perfect definitions of these words, but in order to talk about these issues, we all need to be talking about the same thing. It is clear from the preceding articles that different authors are using different meanings. If we are to have a debate, we need to at least have some common understanding of what we are talking about.

Race is a socially constructed category which changes in time, context and geographical location. The social construction of race is, for the most part formed by the ruling class and the changing definition of race has been dependant on social changes, such as the enlightenment, the rise of capitalism, colonization and chattel slavery in the Americas. These terms were created in a Western, American social reality and largely reflect this.

In the US, “race” is most commonly used to refer to skin color, but this is not always the an accurate use of the word. We can see historical examples of the racialization of white immigrants, such as the Irish, Scottish or Polish. As anarchists, we use the term “race” as a social construct, not as a denotation of skin color.

“Racism” is used in many different ways; the two we want to spend time distinguishing between are the more common liberal definition and a definition we view to be more radical and lends itself more to social change. The liberal definition of racism is found when any race or more appropriately any ethnic group has a social prejudice over any other social/ethnic group, regardless of socio-economic conditions. This definition leads us to the liberal rhetoric of “reverse racism.” This liberal definition also fails to take into consideration institutionalized oppressions, historical racism, relies heavily on a vague concept of “education” as a method to end racism and feeds into American philosophies of meritocracy.

The radical definition is found using the “equation” of power plus prejudice equals racism. The radical definition understands that only those with privilege and power according to socio-economic conditions may in effect be racist and those that are oppressed can be affected by racism. This definition goes on further to state that social prejudices held by people of color are

not “racist” but rather an expression of anger towards the white hegemony. These prejudices are also expressions of anger, misdirected towards other ethnic groups who have been pitted against one another by institutions in power either in the US or in the case of recent immigrants, their home countries. This definition is also more readily applicable to other countries, as there is often dominant ethnic groups or religious groups that uses the racialization of minority ethnic group as basis for oppression (eg: the relationships between English and Irish, Anglophone Canadian and Francophone Canadian, Spanish-descendant Mexican and indigenous Mexicans, etc.). We largely agree with Ruckus’ definition of white supremacy. However, we would make some adjustments to the definition: White supremacy is a system that grants those defined as “white” special socio-economic privileges in American society. Through these privileges, many whites protect each other and police non-whites in order to maintain their white status and the hegemony of the ruling class. Therefore, the ruling class created institutional white supremacy as a means to control the working class; white working class members gain privilege and identify with the white ruling class as opposed to other non-white or even white revolutionary members of their own class. To dismantle the ruling class is to dismantle a privilege for white workers. This alliance does have international implications in that almost all of the white working class in the U.S. identifies with a white national identity, which is a cross class relationship, over an international class identity which unites those who are oppressed along economic conditions.

We view white supremacy as a separate but intricately connected form of institutional oppression from capitalism (this is also true for patriarchy). These institutions come together to form the various oppressions or privileges we face and in effect, alter, shape and help (amongst other conditions) to equally create capitalism. As these institutions change so does capitalism and vice versa. The goal of our revolutionary work is to see institutional oppression collapse so we may live in a new stateless, classless, and oppressive free, society based on mutual aid and directly democratic principles. Hence, we ally our selves with autonomous social movements, which may also be fighting for such goals. Our entry point to our work is a class analysis of society. This does not prioritize class as the worst oppression or even the best oppression for all oppressed people to organize around. It does mean that for us as members of NEFAC, it is A STRATEGIC choice for us. Of course we believe in our strategy and argue our theoretical positions, but our basis of thought does not come from an absolute understanding based in rationalism or empiricism.

While still on the topic, we would like to comment on the definition of racism used by Ryan C. McCarthy in his essay “Reasserting Anarchist Internationalism” [NEA #6, p. 42]. As outlined above, we consider racism to be a specific institution established and upheld by the ruling class that is related to specific socio-economic conditions. By McCarthy stating that “[r]acism is therefore not an institution that stands for itself, but rather a very usefull toll in the hand of capital,” he fails to recognize that racism is more than just a “tool.” Power and racism play out in many different ways in society and through various channels, such as sexual orientation, religion, gender, race, etc. Oppressions expressed through such channels (and through countless others which are not named) are inherently connected to economics, but they are also connected to each other and everything else. Using McCarthy’s logic would dictate that if capitalism fell, then these oppressions would simply melt away and ignores the fact that white supremacy is an institution. The oppressions that give way to racism are shaped and influenced by capitalism and vice versa. In giving an accurate definition of racism, we must recognize that while racism is linked to economics, it also exists as a separate entity, bringing with it a series of interconnected problems that we need to combat.

STRATEGY

Our disagreement with BTR does not rest in a difference between race vs. class organizing. That is much too simplistic of an analysis of oppression, as it reduces our class analysis and worldview into separate dichotomies and reduces oppression and people's lives into neat, finely established categories of race, class and gender, which simply do not exist. The differences lie in the emphasis BTR places on the importance of race in the maintenance of capitalism and therefore, indirectly on the lack of importance other institutional forms of oppression have in maintaining capitalism — such as patriarchy — and in the fact that their strategy and actions (at least those represented in the article) do not fully reflect, nor would they achieve, the desired results of abolishing the white race.

The two primary strategies that have been proposed by BTR to begin a movement with the goal of abolishing the white race are Copwatch and prisoner solidarity/prison abolition. The reasoning behind choosing these two projects seems to be that since people of color are disproportionately impacted by the police state, are more likely to receive a violent response from cops, and are more likely to be victim of the prison industrial complex, one step towards abolishing the white race is to abolish these institutions, or significantly reduce their effectiveness in controlling communities of color, thereby creating a crisis in whiteness.

Yes, most people who are abused by police, receive the worst jail sentences and are disproportionately sentenced to death row are people of color. Yes, communities of color are policed more heavily than white communities. And yes, most people in prison are people of color, specifically African American men. We fail, however, to see how working on these two issues works to abolish the white race. We can see that this is important, necessary work that is invaluable to a revolutionary movement and to the victims of police violence and state repression. But the BTR theory seems to rely on the concept that just because many people of color are adversely affected by the police and prison industrial complex, that abolishing these institutions would create a crisis in whiteness and simultaneously in capitalism.

There are also a number of other important factors — most people of color in the US are poor. Most people of color in the US do not have access to educational opportunities because of inadequate schooling, racist busing systems, and racist school/neighborhood zoning plans. Most public housing tenants are people of color, and most of these housing units are inadequate. People of color have the highest rate of new cases of HIV/AIDS and black women die of breast cancer and ovarian cancer at a higher rate than white women primarily because of inadequate health care (public and private), racist health care facilities and insurance companies.

Our point is that nearly all institutions in the US have an adverse impact on people of color and poor/working class white people when compared to how they impact wealthy or middle class whites. Why then would we think that the strategies of Copwatch and prison abolition are somehow more suited to abolishing the white race than effective housing organizing or struggling for adequate health care?

Our proposal is to take on strategies that build power within all oppressed communities, that are devoid of a hierarchy of oppressions, and recognize that in order to move towards a social revolution, it is necessary to simultaneously create a crisis in white supremacy, in patriarchy and between classes.

In the BTR essay by Roy San Filipo [“Build The Cadre, Abolish The White Race”; NEA#6], it is implied or suggested that by white people showing the police that they are defiant and that the

“enemy,” “criminal” or “bad guy” cannot be determined by the color of their skin, steps will be made toward abolishing whiteness. Is this to suggest that white people should put themselves in situations where they are risking arrest, being beaten by police, arrested, serving prison time, etc. to prove to the cops that all criminals are not people of color? How does this serve to build a revolutionary movement? This does not build community, it demonstrates a level of privilege held by the white participants that has previously and continually been resented by people of color and poor whites. Proponents of Race Traitor and BTR have stated that “...the class bias of the law is partially repressed by racial considerations; the removal of those considerations would give it free reign. White poor would find themselves on the receiving end of police justice as Black people do now. The effect on their consciousness and behavior is predictable.” (1) There are many examples of white revolutionaries who risk arrest, challenge police, and participate in direct action at mass demonstrations and at smaller community demonstrations. These activists are generally critiqued for their participation in demonstrations as they are perceived as exercising their privilege. If it is the act of challenging police authority by white revolutionaries that is an inherent affront to whiteness, then why is a distinction made between white revolutionaries risking arrest and challenging police during a demonstration and white revolutionaries risking arrest and challenging police under the pretense of Copwatch? Both strategies have the same result – showing the police that white people can challenge authority and are just as supposedly “criminal” as people of color. By challenging the police and risking arrest at a mass demonstration, haven’t white revolutionaries worked to eliminate the racial considerations of the law? If no, why not?

If poor whites are going to actively challenge white supremacy it needs to come from struggle and a political alliance with people of color. The challenge must be revolutionary and must be framed in a way that those participating receive direct, concrete benefits from their participation. Building a cross-race class-consciousness is precisely one way to build such political solidarity. Unfortunately, though BTR’s strategies are valuable in and of themselves, Copwatch and prison abolition work do very little to build an anti-racist white movement and do not align poor whites with poor people of color; therefore it has little impact on white supremacy.

Secondly, the theoretical position of the importance of race and its connections with capitalism and other institutional oppressions is questionable and reeks of theoretical authoritarianism. It crudely reduces our conceptions of oppression in society, and also those institutions which create such oppression, into simplistic and separate categories.

BTR claims that their focus on race is a strategic argument based around the importance of race in connection to capitalism. However, a closer look seems to point to a theoretical importance, emphasis and value of race in current or even historical capitalism that devalues other forms of institutional oppression and sets white supremacy above and beyond, to a theoretical “end all be all” in the various complex parts that construct an economic system. As BTR has stated, their decision to focus on race is...

“...a strategic argument, based on an analysis of U.S. history, designed to attack the American death star at its weakest point. The glue that has kept the American state together has been white supremacy; melting that glue creates revolutionary possibilities.”

Capitalism, an economic process in society, is a complex ever changing system, comprised of many social and economic processes. These different processes combine to equally form the

monster we know as capitalism. To claim that race or white supremacy is “the glue” that binds the whole economic system together reduces the various processes and places emphasis on one particular category. It is our opinion that each oppressive institution, including capitalism, cannot be reduced so simplistically. In reducing the existence of capitalism to one particular form of oppression, such as race, you are inevitably valuing one process over all others. By taking this position, BTR has, in effect, placed an authoritarian theoretical importance on race over other forms of oppression. San Filippo did state that they do not believe they “posses any kind of truth or correct ideas about struggle”, however, their theoretical position surrounding race clearly contradict his statements.

For instance, BTR claims the organization has an explicitly feminist focus, but it simultaneously down plays the relative importance patriarchy plays as opposed to race in relation to capitalism. To continue the metaphor, is patriarchy not a glue? Is its binding power too weak and is therefore, less important for revolutionaries to struggle against in class based organizing. If patriarchy is not on an equal footing with race or class, then it is easy to dismiss BTR’s argument. To simply say an organization has a “feminist focus” is not enough especially when its main theoretical position downplays the very importance of patriarchy in their work.

Since its development, capitalism has been intricately entwined with patriarchy. Each process has largely benefited from the other and has produced new forms of not only class oppression but gender oppression as well; conditions which cannot be neatly separated from each other. Unpaid “women’s work”, gendered class divisions, privileging one gender in the work force over another, and all the social controls that emanate from such an institution all work to maintain patriarchy. Never mind the various social conditions and responsibilities each gender has which are very much a part of the conditions of existence of capitalism, such as the development of the nuclear family and the gendered role of political decision making in capitalist governments.

San Filippo states that “BTR is a class war document”. Therefore, BTR’s race organizing is to establish class war. It is precisely to “engender a revolutionary crisis in the existing system by attacking the institutions of white supremacy” [San Filippo, NEA#6, p. 41]. This in and of itself we applaud. To combat white supremacy is important and necessary to ending all oppression and simultaneously important in any class based organizing, but it is no more important in the demise of capitalism and the state than patriarchy or class.

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