

Race, class

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COMMENT: KEEANGA-YAMAHTTA TAYLOR
and Marxism

Marxism has been accused by its critics of misunderstanding race and downplaying the struggle against racism. **Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor** sets the record straight.

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FOR REVOLUTIONARY Marxists, there is an inextricable link between racism and capitalism. Capitalism is dependant on racism as both a source of profiteering, but more importantly as a means to divide and rule. Racism is necessary to drive a wedge between workers who otherwise have everything in common and every reason to ally and organize together, but who are perpetually driven apart to the benefit of the ruling class.

Thus, any serious discussion about Black liberation has to take up not only a critique of capitalism, but also a credible strategy for ending it. For Marxists, that strategy hinges on the revolutionary potential of a unified, multiracial and multi-ethnic working-class upheaval against capitalism.

Marxists believe that the potential for that kind of unity is dependant on battles and struggles against racism today. Without a commitment by revolutionary organizations in the here and now to the fight against racism, working-class unity will never be achieved and the revolutionary *potential* of the working class will never be realized.

Yet despite all the evidence of this commitment to fighting racism over many decades, Marxism has been maligned as, at best, "blind" to combating racism and, at worst, "incapable" of it. For example, in an article published last summer, popular commentator and self-described "anti-racist" Tim Wise summarized the critique of "left activists" that he later defines as Marxists. He writes:

[L]eft activists often marginalize people of color by operating from a framework of extreme class reductionism, which holds that the "real" issue is class, not race, that "the only color that matters is green," and that issues like racism are mere "identity politics," which should take a backseat to promoting class-based universalism and programs to help working people. This reductionism, by ignoring the way that even middle class and affluent people of color face racism and color-based

discrimination (and by presuming that low-income folks of color and low-income whites are equally oppressed, despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary) reinforces white denial, privileges white perspectivism and dismisses the lived reality of people of color.

Even more, as we'll see, it ignores perhaps the most important political lesson regarding the interplay of race and class: namely, that the biggest reason why there is so little working-class consciousness and unity in the Untied States (and thus, why class-based programs to uplift all in need are so much weaker here than in the rest of the industrialized world), is precisely because of racism and the way that white racism has been deliberately inculcated among white working folks.

Only by confronting that directly (rather than sidestepping it as class reductionists seek to do) can we ever hope to build cross-racial, class based coalitions. In other words, for the policies favored by the class reductionist to work--be they social democrats or Marxists--or even to come into being, racism and white supremacy must be challenged directly.

Here, Wise accuses Marxism of: "extreme class reductionism," meaning that Marxists allegedly think that class is more important than race; reducing struggles against racism to "mere identity politics"; and requiring that struggles against racism should "take a back seat" to struggles over economic issues. Wise also accuses so-called "left activists" of reinforcing "white denial" and "dismiss[ing] the lived reality of people of color"--which, of course, presumes Left activists and Marxists to all be white.

What do Marxists actually say?

Marxists argue that capitalism is a system that is based on the exploitation of the many by the few. Because it is a system based on gross inequality, it requires various tools to divide the majority--racism and all oppressions under capitalism serve this purpose. Moreover, oppression is used to justify and "explain" unequal relationships in society that enrich the minority that live off the majority's labor. Thus, racism developed initially to explain and justify the enslavement of Africans--because they were less than human and undeserving of liberty and freedom.

Everyone accepts the idea that the oppression of slaves was rooted in the class relations of exploitation under that system. Fewer recognize that under capitalism, *wage slavery* is the pivot around which all other inequalities and

oppressions turn. Capitalism used racism to justify plunder, conquest and slavery, but as Karl Marx pointed out, it also used racism to divide and rule--to pit one section of the working class against another and thereby blunt class consciousness.

To claim, as Marxists do, that racism is a product of capitalism is not to deny or diminish its importance or impact in American society. It is simply to explain its origins and the reasons for its perpetuation. Many on the left today talk about class as if it is one of many oppressions, often describing it as "classism." What people are really referring to as "classism" is elitism or snobbery, and not the fundamental organization of society under capitalism.

Moreover, it is popular today to talk about various oppressions, including class, as intersecting. While it is true that oppressions can reinforce and compound each other, they are born out of the material relations shaped by capitalism and the economic exploitation that is at the heart of capitalist society. In other words, it is the material and economic structure of society that gave rise to a range of ideas and ideologies to justify, explain and help perpetuate that order. In the United States, racism is the most important of those ideologies.

Despite the widespread beliefs to the contrary of his critics, Karl Marx himself was well aware of the centrality of race under capitalism. While Marx did not write extensively on the question of slavery and its racial impact in societies specifically, he did write about the way in which European capitalism emerged because of its pilfering, rape and destruction, famously writing:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of Black skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.

He also recognized the extent to which slavery was central to the world economy. He wrote:

Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade, and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance.

Without slavery North America, the most progressive of countries, would be transformed into a patriarchal country. Wipe out North America from the map of the world, and you will have anarchy--the

complete decay of modern commerce and civilization. Cause slavery to disappear and you will have wiped America off the map of nations. Thus slavery, because it is an economic category, has always existed among the institutions of the peoples. Modern nations have been able only to disguise slavery in their own countries, but they have imposed it without disguise upon the New World.

Thus, there is a fundamental understanding of the centrality of slave labor in the national and international economy. But what about race?

Despite the dearth of Marx's own writing on race in particular, one might look at Marx's correspondence and deliberations on the American Civil War to draw conclusions as to whether Marx was as dogmatically focused on purely economic issues as his critics make him out be.

One must raise the question: If Marx was reductionist, how is his unabashed support and involvement in abolitionist struggles in England explained? If Marx was truly an economic reductionist, he might have surmised that slavery and capitalism were incompatible, and simply waited for slavery to whither away. W.E.B. Du Bois in his Marxist tome *Black Reconstruction*, quotes at length a letter penned by Marx as the head of the International Workingmen's Association, written to Abraham Lincoln in 1864 in the midst of the Civil War:

The contest for the territories which opened the epoch, was it not to decide whether the virgin soil of immense tracts should be wedded to the labor of the immigrant or be prostituted by the tramp of the slaver driver? When an oligarchy of 300,000 slave holders dared to inscribe for the first time in the annals of the world "Slavery" on the banner of armed revolt, when on the very spots where hardly a century ago the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first declaration of the rights of man was issued...when on the very spots counter-revolution...maintained "slavery to be a beneficial institution"...and cynically proclaimed property in man 'the cornerstone of the new edifice'...then the working classes of Europe understood at once...that the slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy war of property against labor...

They consider it an earnest sign of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggles for the rescue of the enslaved race and the Reconstruction of a social order.

Not only was Marx personally opposed to slavery and actively organized against it, but he theorized that slavery and the resultant race discrimination that flowed from it were not just problems for the slaves themselves, but for white workers

who were constantly under the threat of losing work to slave labor.

This did not mean white workers were necessarily sympathetic to the cause of the slaves--most of them were not. But Marx was not addressing the issue of consciousness, but objective factors when he wrote in *Capital*, "In the United States of America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the Black it is branded."

Moreover, Marx understood the dynamics of racism in a modern sense as well--as a means by which workers who had common, objective interests with each other could also become mortal enemies because of subjective, but nevertheless real, racist and nationalist ideas. Looking at the tensions between Irish and English workers, with a nod toward the American situation between Black and white workers, Marx wrote:

Every industrial and commercial center in England possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude is much the same as that of the "poor whites" to the "niggers" in the former slave states of the USA. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and stupid tool of the English rule in Ireland.

This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.

Out of this quote, one can see a Marxist theory of how racism operated in contemporary society, after slavery was ended. Marx was highlighting three things: first, that capitalism promotes economic competition between workers; second, that the ruling class uses racist ideology to divide workers against each other; and finally, that when one group of workers suffer oppression, it negatively impacts the entire class.

How the Marxist theory of racism developed

These questions get to the heart of Marxism and really begin to address whether Marxism subsumes political questions to economic ones.

Here's how Marx described the issue of ideas themselves:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the material intercourse of men appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behavior...Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc....Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life process.

This does not mean that humans are only automatons with no thought, creativity, ideas or agency, and that life is a linear and determined existence. Human action or inaction constantly impacts and changes the environment and the world around us. But human activity is shaped by the material world. Racism is ideological, but it has tangible implications in the real world. Stating that racism is ideological does not somehow, then, render it less important, but distinguishes the difference between a question of material conditions and consciousness.

It is undeniable that some in the socialist and Marxist traditions--primarily in the 19th and early 20th century--assumed that because African Americans were overrepresented as workers, simply focusing on the class struggle would by itself liberate Black workers and the poor from their oppression. But Marxist theory on the "Black question" has certainly evolved since then. Marxism should not be conceived of as an unchanging dogma. It is a guide to social revolution and political action, and has been built upon by successive generations of Marxists.

But theory doesn't precede material and social conditions--it flows from them. In the mid-1920s, when hundreds of thousands of African Americans made their way to the urban North, socialists and communists were forced to theorize how they would relate to Black workers on a mass scale--something that had never been an issue before. Black revolutionary Claude McKay reported as a delegate to the Communist International in 1922:

In associating with the comrades of America, I have found demonstrations of prejudice on the various occasions when the white and black comrades had to get together, and this is the greatest obstacle that the Communists of America have got to overcome--the fact that they first have got to emancipate themselves from the ideas they entertained toward Negroes before they can be able to reach the Negroes with any kind of radical propaganda.

The Russian revolutionary Lenin directly intervened in the American Communist Party (CP) and directed it to immediately begin political agitation among African Americans. Thus, the founding convention of the Communist Party in 1919 stated merely that the "racial oppression of the Negro is simply the expression of his economic bondage and oppression, each intensifying the other." By 1921, after Lenin's involvement on the question, the stated approach of the CP had shifted, with its program stating:

The Negro workers in America are exploited and oppressed more ruthlessly than any other group. The history of the Southern Negro is the history of a reign of terror--of persecution, rape and murder...Because of the anti-Negro policies of organized labor, the Negro has despaired of aid from this source, and he has either been driven into the camp of labor's enemies, or has been compelled to develop purely racial organizations which seek purely racial aims.

The Workers Party will support the Negroes in their struggle for Liberation, and will help them in their fight for economic, political and social equality...Its task will be to destroy altogether the barrier of race prejudice that has been used to keep apart the Black and white workers, and bind them into a solid union of revolutionary forces for the overthrow of our common enemy.

By the early 1940s, thousands of Blacks had joined the Communist Party. The politics of communism became the dominant political framework for most of the nonwhite world as hundreds of millions of people of color across the globe were inspired by the writings of Lenin on the rights of oppressed nations to fight for their own freedom. Lenin wrote:

The proletariat must struggle against the enforced retention of oppressed nations within the bounds of the given state...The proletariat must demand freedom of political separation for the colonies and nations oppressed by "their own" nation. Otherwise, the internationalism of the proletariat would be nothing but empty words; neither confidence nor class solidarity would be possible between the workers of the oppressed and the oppressor nations...

On the other hand, the socialists of the oppressed nation must, in particular, defend and implement the full and unconditional unity, including organizational unity, of the workers of the oppressed nation and those of the oppressor nation. Without this it is impossible to defend the independent policy of the proletariat and their class solidarity with the proletariat of other countries.

So it is an odd charge that Marxism is incapable of comprehending the racialized

nature of capitalism, while simultaneously becoming the politics that led the vast majority of non-white national liberation movements in the 20th century. The critique of Marxism also minimizes the extent to which Black revolutionaries and the Black struggle itself shaped and impacted the trajectory of Marxist thought.

Thus, C.L.R. James, the Black revolutionary from the Caribbean and collaborator with Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, advanced Marxist theory when he wrote--presciently in 1948, years before the emergence of the civil rights movement in the U.S. South:

We say, number one, that the Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle, has a vitality and a validity of its own; that it has deep historic roots in the past of America and in present struggles; it has an organic political perspective, along which it is traveling, to one degree or another, and everything shows that at the present time it is traveling with great speed and vigor.

We say, number two, that this independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights and is not led necessarily either by the organized labor movement or the Marxist party.

We say, number three, and this is the most important, that it is able to exercise a powerful influence upon the revolutionary proletariat, that it has got a great contribution to make to the development of the proletariat in the United States, and that it is in itself a constituent part of the struggle for socialism.

In this way we challenge directly any attempt to subordinate or to push to the rear the social and political significance of the independent Negro struggle for democratic rights. That is our position. It was the position of Lenin 30 years ago. It was the position of Trotsky which he fought for during many years. It has been concretized by the general class struggle in the United States, and the tremendous struggles of the Negro people.

The question of white workers

Much of the controversy about Marxism and race is over whether Marxist theory appropriately comprehends the centrality of race in U.S. society and beyond. But what is really at the heart of the debate is the view of revolutionary Marxists that: one, white workers do not have a privileged status in this country; two, white

workers can gain revolutionary consciousness; and three, therefore a multiracial and united working-class revolution is possible.

Marxists start with the premise that all workers under capitalism are oppressed, but some workers face further oppression because of additional discrimination like racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-immigrant ideas, religious oppression, etc. Thus, in the United States, white workers are oppressed, but not to the same degree as non-white workers.

Oppression is not just an ideological tool to divide groups of workers, but has real material consequences as well. Because of racism, for example, the median household income for white families as of 2006 was over \$50,000 a year. For Blacks, it was just under \$32,000. By every measure of the quality of life in the U.S., whites are on the top and Blacks are on the bottom.

Marxists do not deny that these differences exist, nor do we deny that oppression means the lives of some workers are actually worse than others. For Marxists, the question is the cause of the differences. Are the disparities the result of white workers benefiting directly from the oppression of Black workers? That is, do white workers make more on average because Black workers make less?

To accept this explanation means to ignore the biggest beneficiary in the disparity in wages--employers and bosses. That employers are able to use racism to justify paying Black workers less brings the wages of all workers down--the employers enjoy the difference.

This is not to deny that white workers receive some advantages in U.S. society because they are white in a racist society. If they did not get some advantage--and with it, the illusion that the system works for them--then racism would not be effective in dividing Black and white workers.

The distinctions and differences among workers function to create a distorted view of reality that turns the traits attributed to the oppressed into a kind of "common sense," which in turn deepens those divisions. African Americans are poorer, have worse housing, go to worse schools, have a shorter life span and generally live in worse conditions, which helps to perpetuate the image in the minds of white workers that African Americans are inferior.

But the problem with so-called "common sense" is that it is based on surface appearances and information, and does not reach deeper to give a systemic explanation for the disparities that exist in society. Instead, it creates what Frederick Engels was the first to call "false consciousness."

False consciousness is simply ruling-class ideology that is used to explain away or cover up material reality. The point is that white workers, to the extent that they

accept white supremacy, contribute to capitalism's ability to exploit them more effectively. The purely "psychological" advantage obscures the very real material deficit that racist oppression helps reinforce.

Du Bois explained how "false consciousness" worked in the South and why a labor movement never developed there in the aftermath of slavery:

The race element was emphasized in order that property holders could get the support of the majority of white laborers and make it more possible to exploit Negro labor. But the race philosophy came as a new and terrible thing to make labor unity or labor class-consciousness impossible. So long as the Southern white laborers could be induced to prefer poverty to equality with the Negro, just so long was a labor movement in the South made impossible.

For Du Bois, racism wasn't metaphysical, nor did it exist autonomously from class. Its development is a result of one class' efforts to keep power away from another. Du Bois did come up with a famous formulation of poor whites gaining a "psychological wage"--as opposed to a material wage--from racism. But the psychological wage was to make the white worker feel superior because he wasn't Black, even though he would have nothing material to show for it.

This leads to the question: If it isn't in the interest of white workers to be racist, then why do they accept racist ideas? But the same question could be asked of any group of workers. Why do men accept sexist ideas? Why do Black workers accept racist anti-immigrant ideas? Why do many Black Caribbean and African immigrant workers think that Black Americans are lazy? Why do American workers of all races accept many racist ideas about Arabs and Muslims? If most people agree that it would be in the interest of any group of workers to be more united than divided, then why do workers accept reactionary ideas?

There are two primary reasons. The first is competition. Capitalism operates under the laws of false scarcity, which simply means that we are all told there isn't enough to go around, so we must compete with each other for housing, education, jobs and anything else valued in society. While the scarcity is false, the competition is real, and workers fighting over these items to better themselves or their families are often willing to believe the worst about other workers to justify why they should have something and others should not.

The other reason is, as Marx wrote in the *German Ideology*, that the ruling ideas of any society are the ideas of the ruling class. We live in a racist society, and therefore people hold racist ideas. The more important question is whether or not those ideas can change. The consciousness of workers is both fluid and contradictory because of the clash between the "ruling ideas" in society and people's lived experience. So, for example, while the media inundates people with

constant images of Blacks as criminals or on welfare, people's experience with Blacks at work completely contradicts the stereotype.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci explained the phenomenon of mixed consciousness this way:

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity which nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can...be historically in opposition to his activity.

One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. The person is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over.

Whether or not a group of workers has reactionary, mixed or even revolutionary consciousness does not change their objective and real function as exploited and oppressed labor. The question of consciousness affects whether or not workers are in a position to fundamentally alter that function through collective action.

Just because white workers, to take a specific example, may at different times fully accept reactionary ideas about African Americans does not change the objective fact that the majority of the poor in the U.S. are white, the majority of people without health insurance are white and the majority of the homeless are white. While Blacks and Latinos are disproportionately affected by the economic reality of the U.S. today, in a country that is more than 65 percent white, it is a reality they share with the majority of white workers.

This shared reality shows the potential for a united struggle to better the conditions of all workers. But by the same token, losing the battle against racism undermines the overall project of working-class revolution. As Du Bois explained in *Black Reconstruction* about the defeat of the post-Civil War Reconstruction policies that briefly put the power of the federal government behind equal rights for the freed slaves:

The political success of the doctrine of racial separation, which overthrew Reconstruction by uniting the planter and the poor white, was far exceeded by its astonishing economic results.

The theory of laboring class unity rests upon the assumption that laborers, despite internal jealousies, will unite because of their opposition to exploitation by the capitalists. According to this, even after a part of the poor white laboring class became identified with the planters, and eventually displaced them, their interests would be diametrically opposed to those of the mass of white labor, and of course to those of the black laborers. This would throw white and black labor into one class, and precipitate a united fight for higher wage and better working conditions.

Most persons do not realize how far this failed to work in the South, and it failed to work because the theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest.

Marxism and Black America today

Today, the need for a revolutionary alternative to the failures of capitalism has never been greater. The election of Barack Obama came 40 years after the passage of the 1968 Civil Rights Act, the last piece of civil rights legislation from the civil rights era of the 1960s. Despite the enormous shift in racial attitudes symbolized by the election of a Black president in a country built in large part on the enslavement of Black people, the condition of the vast majority of African Americans today is perilous.

For almost two years, Black unemployment has fluctuated between 15 and 17 percent. Almost 20 percent of African Americans under the age of 65 are without health insurance compared to 15 percent for the rest of the population. According to the Center for Responsible Lending, a home owned by an African American or Latino family is 76 percent more likely to be foreclosed upon than a white-owned home.

The wipeout of home ownership among African Americans threatens to widen even more the gap in median family net worth. In 2007, the average white family had a net worth of more than \$171,000 compared to less than \$29,000 for African American and Latino families. More than 25 percent of Blacks and Latinos languish below the official poverty line, and more than a third of Black and Latino children live in poverty.

The distressing numbers that document the full impact of racism and discrimination in the United States have no end. But while conditions across Black America threaten to wipe out the economic gains made possible by the civil rights movement, millions of white workers are meeting their Black brothers and sisters on the way down. Tens of millions of white workers are stuck in long-term joblessness, without health insurance and waiting for their homes to be foreclosed upon.

Thus, the question of Black, Latino and white unity is not abstract or academic, but must be a concrete discussion about how to collectively go forward.

For most of the 20th century, legal racism both North and South created a tension-filled cross-class alliance in the African American community that was focused on freedom and equal treatment. The legislative fruition of that in the form of legal civil rights removed the barriers to advance for a small section of Black America. To be sure, the "Black middle class" is tenuous, fragile and, for many, a paycheck or two away from oblivion, but a more stable and ambitious Black elite most definitely exists, and their objectives and aspirations are anathema to the future of the mass of Black people.

No serious Marxist organization demands that Black and Latino workers put their struggles on the backburner while some mythical class struggle is waged beforehand. This impossible formulation rests on the ridiculous notion that the working class is white and male, and thus incapable of taking up issues of race, class and gender. In fact, the American working class is female, immigrant, Black and white. Immigrant issues, gender issues and anti-racism *are* working-class issues and to miss this is to be operating with a completely anachronistic idea of the working class.

Genuine Marxist organizations understand that the only way of achieving unity in the working class over time is to fight for unity today and every day. Workers will never unite to fight for state power if they cannot unite to fight for workplace demands today. If white workers are not won to anti-racism today, they will never unite with Black workers for a revolution tomorrow. If Black workers are not won to being against anti-immigrant racism today, they will never unite with Latino workers for a revolution tomorrow.

This is why Lenin said that a revolutionary party based on Marxism must be a "tribune of the oppressed," willing to fight against the oppression of any group of people, regardless of the class of those affected. And this is why, despite the anti-Marxist slurs from academics and even some who consider themselves part of the left, the idea that Marxism has been on the outside of the struggle against racism in the U.S. and around the world defies history and the legacy of Black revolutionaries who understood Marxism as a strategy for emancipation and liberation.

The challenge today is to make revolutionary Marxism, once again, a part of the discussion of how to end the social catastrophe that is unfolding in Black communities across the United States.

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Socialism and Black liberation [1]

How is the struggle against racism connected to the struggle for socialism? SocialistWorker.org writers explain what Marxists have to say.

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[2] <http://socialistworker.org/2010/10/21/the-roots-of-racism>

[3] <http://socialistworker.org/2010/11/18/race-and-us-socialist-tradition>

[4] <http://socialistworker.org/2011/01/04/race-class-and-marxism>

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