

Antiracism: a neoliberal alternative to a left

Adolph Reed Jr.¹

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At a 1991 conference at the Harvard Law School, where he was a tenured full professor, I heard the late, esteemed legal theorist, Derrick Bell, declare on a panel that blacks had made no progress since 1865. I was startled not least because Bell's own life, as well as the fact that Harvard's black law students' organization put on the conference, so emphatically belied his claim. I have since come to understand that those who make such claims experience no sense of contradiction because the contention that nothing has changed is intended actually as an assertion that racism persists as the most consequential force impeding black Americans' aspirations, that no matter how successful or financially secure individual black people become, they remain similarly subject to victimization by racism.

That assertion is not to be taken literally as an empirical claim, even though many advancing it seem earnestly convinced that it is; it is rhetorical. No sane or at all knowledgeable person can believe that black Americans live under the same restricted and perilous conditions now as in 1865. The claim therefore carries a silent preface: "(this incident/phenomenon/pattern makes it seem as though) nothing has changed." It is more a jeremiad than an analysis and is usually advanced in response to some outrage. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Henwood 2013), for the claim to have the desired rhetorical force, those making it must assume that things *have* changed because the charge is fundamentally a denunciation of objectionable conditions or incidents as atavistic and a call for others to regard them as such. Attempting to mobilize outrage about some action or expression through associating it with discredited and vilified views or practices is a common gambit in hortatory political rhetoric, more or less effective for a rally or leaflet. But this antiracist politics is ineffective and even destructive when it takes the place of scholarly interpretation or strategic political analysis.

New Orleans provides a useful illustration of the limitations of contemporary antiracism as a politics. Antiracist political critique failed abysmally after Katrina to mobilize significant opposition to elimination of low-income public housing or to the ongoing destruction of public schools. That politics, which posits an abstract "black community" against an equally abstract "racism," could not provide persuasive responses to the blend of underclass ideology that

✉ Adolph Reed, Jr.
reedal@sas.upenn.edu

¹ Department of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania, 3440 Market Street, Suite 300, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA

stigmatizes public housing as an incubator of a degraded population (Reed 2016a, b: 264–269). Nevertheless, race-reductionist argument continues to dominate the political imagination of those who would challenge structures of inequality. It has remained, without critical reflection or strategic reassessment, the default stance of putatively insurgent or oppositional black politics in the city and was most recently on display in a controversy over removal of monuments erected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to celebrate the Confederacy and white.

In the spring of 2017, the City, at the mayor's initiative and with support of six of the seven council members, removed from public display four odious monuments to the treasonous Confederate insurrection that had been a nasty affront to egalitarian values for more than a century (Reed 2017b).¹ Mayor Mitch Landrieu announced his intention to remove them after South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley took down the Confederate battle flag from the statehouse grounds, where its presence had been the source of long-standing controversy, in the wake of Dylan Roof's racially inspired murder of parishioners at a black Charleston church. Activists linked to Black Lives Matter and the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100), a group organized through the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture at the University of Chicago, created an ad hoc alliance, Take 'Em Down NOLA, to agitate for removal not only of the four monuments but of "all the public symbols – monuments, school names, and street signs dedicated to white supremacists" (Reed 2017c; Black Youth Project; Bentley 2015).

The city is certainly a better place for being rid of those monuments, and having removed them from public display could be a step toward finally defeating the Lost Cause/Heritage ideology that remains too useful a tool of the right for making class power invisible in both the past and the present. But, while the group's efforts contributed appreciably to pressing the issue and mobilizing some public support for removal, Take 'Em Down NOLA's campaign also obscured class power, ironically in the same way as did the fin-de-siècle ruling class that erected the monuments. For Take 'Em Down NOLA and other antiracist activists, the monuments' significance is allegorical; they are icons representing an abstract, ultimately ontological white supremacy that drives and reproduces racial inequality in the present as in the past. The monuments, that is, are props in the broader race-reductionist discourse that also analogizes contemporary inequality to Jim Crow or slavery. Instructively, Take 'Em Down NOLA's goal is not simply to remove every vestige of commemoration, no matter how obscure or trivial, of any historical figure associated with the Confederate insurrection or slavery.

Despite their hyperbolic contention that the monuments inflict daily injury on and "psychologically terrorize" black New Orleanians (Smith 2017; Take 'Em Down NOLA), Take 'Em Down NOLA's agitation for removal is the instrument of a more evanescent project. Their goal, as poet and Harvard graduate student Clint Smith described it in a *New Republic* puff piece, is "an ongoing attempt to foster an honest reckoning with the past." As to what that

¹ The monuments were to the confederate insurrection's commanding general, Robert E. Lee; the insurrectionist Confederacy's president, Jefferson Davis; rebel Gen. P. G. T. Beauregard, who had New Orleans connections; and commemoration of the Crescent City White League's armed, explicitly racist revolt against the city's Reconstruction government; the White League, which was the terrorist face of the local Democratic party, represented itself as "defenders of a hereditary civilization and Christianity menaced by a stupid Africanization," and in 1932 the city added an inscription to the commemorative obelisk, erected in 1891, that praised the insurrection in explicitly white supremacist terms. All the monuments were erected between 1884 (Lee) and 1915 (Beauregard), the precise period of white supremacist consolidation (Reed, 2017b).

honest reckoning might look like or produce, neither he nor they have much concrete to say. “Entirely erasing tributes to the confederacy from New Orleans might never happen,” Smith allows, “but the work of Take ‘Em Down NOLA forces us to consider what it might say about us if we did – and what it says about the fact that we have not yet done so” (Smith 2017). That is, the group’s agitation is driven more by demanding that “racism” be recognized as the source of inequality than by pursuing specific policy goals.

This is a feature of contemporary antiracist discourse generally. Antiracist activism and scholarship proceed from the view that statistical disparities in the distribution by race of goods and bads in the society in which blacks appear worse off categorically (e.g., less wealth, higher rates of unemployment, greater incidence of hypertensive and cardiovascular disease) amount to evidence that “race” remains fundamentally determinative of black Americans’ lives. As Merlin Chowkwanyun and I argue, however, disparity is an outcome, not an explanation, and deducing cause simplistically from outcome (e.g., treating racially disparate outcomes as *ipso facto* evidence of racially invidious causation) seems sufficient only if one has already stacked the interpretive deck in favor of a particular causal account (Reed and Chowkwanyun 2012, 167–168). We also discuss a garbage in, garbage out effect in studies that rely on large-scale aggregate data analysis; gross categories like race may mask significant micro-level dynamics that could present more complex and nuanced understandings of causality. Put another way, if you go out looking for racial effects in data sets that are organized by race as gross categories, you will be likely to find them, but that will not necessarily lead to sound interpretations of the factors that actually produce the inequalities. As likely as not that purblind approach can lead to missing “the extent to which particular inequalities that appear statistically as ‘racial’ disparities are in fact embedded in multiple social relations” (Reed and Chowkwanyun 2012, 150–151, 158–159). This issue is not a concern for antiracist politics because its fundamental goal is propagation of the view that inequalities or injustices suffered by black Americans should be understood as resulting from generic white racism. Its objective, that is, is rhetorical and ideological, not political and programmatic.

Antiracist discourse posits White Supremacy/racism as a totalizing phenomenon, a force impervious to changing institutional circumstances—a primordial foundation of being, just as the White League contended in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The thrust of the Take ‘Em Down NOLA argument, for example, is that: (1) the monuments were erected to celebrate white supremacist power, which was the foundation of slavery, lynching and brutalization of black New Orleanians, disfranchisement, imposition of Jim Crow, and denial of blacks’ basic civil rights. (2) The fact that they remain on display in the present underscores the continuity of White Supremacy’s power. (3) That continuity indicates that, as in the past, contemporary racial inequalities most meaningfully result from white supremacy, which therefore must be the primary target of struggles for social and racial justice.

But adducing a causal dynamic that underlay a political conjuncture in the past to support a claim about causality in the present *presumes* that the same dynamics operated in the past and present. That is, the race-reductionist formulation advanced to validate the claim of white supremacy’s overarching power presumes what it needs to demonstrate. Sociologist Mara Loveman follows Rogers Brubaker, Pierre Bourdieu, and others in arguing that this interpretive problem and the confusions that generate it can be addressed by “abandoning ‘race’ as a category of analysis to gain analytical leverage to study ‘race’ as a category of practice” (Loveman 1999, 895–896; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Bourdieu 1991). She embraces historian Barbara J. Fields’s assessment that “attempts to explain ‘racial phenomena’ in terms of ‘race’ are no more than definitional statements” and argues that “Rejection of ‘race’ as an

analytical concept facilitates analysis of the historical construction of ‘race’ as a practical category without reification, and thus provides a degree of analytical leverage that tends to be foreclosed when race is used analytically” (Loveman 1999, 895–896; Fields 1990, 100).

In the current political context that interpretive pathology is pernicious politically because the claim of continuity demands ignoring historical specificities of both past and present that are crucially important for making adequate sense of either. The point of analogizing current conditions to slavery or earlier regimes of openly white supremacist hierarchy is to subordinate consideration of the discrete, complex mechanisms through which contemporary inequalities are reproduced in quotidian life to the meta-historical contention that generic white supremacy, or racism, most significantly explains disadvantages and injustices that black Americans suffer today. But even in the nineteenth century, at the nadir of the defeat of Reconstruction and imposition of disfranchisement and the Jim Crow order, black politics was not adequately reducible to a unitary struggle against white supremacy; differences of perspective, agendas, and programs pertained among blacks and determined strategic directions, including pursuit of allies (Stein 1974).

In addressing another racially charged issue—how we should regard Rachel Dolezal’s embrace of a transracial identity in relation to Caitlyn Jenner’s embrace of a transgender one—historian Susan Stryker neatly describes the appeal and limitations of argument by analogy:

Analogy is a weak form of analysis, in which a better-known case is compared to one that is lesser known, and thereby offered as a model for understanding something that is not yet well understood...Analogy’s rhetorical strength is to be found precisely in its ability to condense complicated forms of similarity into singularly powerful linguistic gestures and acts of speech, while its analytical weakness lies precisely in the non-identity of the things being compared (Stryker 2015).

Even if we were to accept “racism” as a label summarizing the various factors involved, noting those apparent similarities does not tell us *how* inequalities are reproduced today and has nothing to say practically about how to combat them. And it is important to interrogate why it is paramount within the antiracist framework that we understand the present through analogy to the past.

In the antiracist political project white supremacy/racism is—like “terrorism”—an amorphous, ideological abstraction whose specific content exists largely in the eyes of the beholder. Therefore, like antiterrorism, antiracism’s targets can be porous and entirely arbitrary; this means that, also like antiterrorism, the struggle can never be won. Clint Smith’s romantic assessment of *Take ‘Em Down NOLA*’s contribution indicates as much and makes clear, as does everything that Ta-Nehisi Coates has ever written (e.g., Coates 2014, 2016a, b, 2017), that winning anything concrete is not the point. The “politics” that follows from this view centers on pursuit of recognition and representation on groupist terms—both as symbolic depiction in the public realm and as claims to articulate the interests, perspectives, or “voices” of a generic black constituency or some subset thereof, e.g., “youth” or “grassroots.” It is not interested in broadly egalitarian redistribution.

Notwithstanding its performative evocations of the 1960s Black Power populist “militancy,” this antiracist politics is neither leftist in itself nor particularly compatible with a left politics as conventionally understood. At this political juncture, it is, like bourgeois feminism and other groupist tendencies, an oppositional epicycle *within* hegemonic neoliberalism, one might say a component of neoliberalism’s critical self-consciousness; it is thus in fact fundamentally *anti*-leftist. Black political elites’ attacks on the Bernie Sanders 2016

presidential nomination campaign's call for decommodified public higher education as frivolous, irresponsible, or even un-American underscores how deeply embedded this politics is within neoliberalism (Richardson 2016; Sheinin 2016; Johnson 2016).

During the campaign, antiracist activists and commentators routinely attacked Sanders for being inattentive to black concerns, which they insisted are separate from political economy and capitalist class dynamics and reduced to pro forma rehearsal of slogans like "black lives matter" and denunciation of an abstract "systemic racism." After the 2016 election, antiracist hostility toward efforts to generate broadly working class-based, social-democratic alternatives to Democratic neoliberalism, if anything, intensified. Coates (2017), for example, denounces as white supremacist any suggestions that working-class whites' votes for Trump stem from anything other than commitment to white supremacy. Social scientists and other public opinion experts have provided steady grist for antiracist and other identitarian ideologues' incessant rehearsal of the trope of a hopelessly backward, racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic white working class as the main danger to progress in the society. In this insistence, they join Clintonoid neoliberal Democrats of all races, genders, and sexual orientations who reject downwardly redistributive politics for more openly class-based reasons. Thus, as Mark Dudzic points out in a superb essay originally written before the election:

Joan Walsh, among many others, opined that Sanders' substantial support among white workers (who overwhelmingly supported Clinton in 2008) is because "she has been damaged by her association with the first black president." And Paul Krugman, that eternal guardian of the left gate of the ruling class, pontificated that the Sanders campaign failed to understand the importance of "horizontal inequality" between groups (Dudzic 2017).

Dudzic's assessment of liberals' reaction to the social-democratic enthusiasm Sanders sparked applies equally to antiracist activists and commentators:

The Sanders campaign was so disorienting to both conservatives and liberals because it did not embrace these naturalized categories [racism and sexism] but, instead, revealed them as social relationships established by real human beings and, thus, open to change through the application of political and economic policies. After stumbling a bit in the early months around how to give voice to the outrages of police violence and mass incarceration, it laid out a working class politics of hope that was both visionary and practical. In the process, it helped lay bare the actual mechanisms of capitalism that drive inequality. And it exposed the fault lines created by decades of neoliberalism that are impeding real change in the labor, racial justice and other social movements (Dudzic 2017).

Although its attraction to Black Power "militancy" suggests insurgent racial populism, the current race-reductionist politics centers on exposé and demands for recognition, not egalitarian redistribution. Its project is elimination of disparities *within* a regime of intensifying economic inequality, which antiracism takes as given. As Warren et al. put it:

antiracists...remain attuned to a vision of justice defined by ensuring equal access to hierarchically distributed social goods such as family wealth (and redressing historical impediments to the accumulation of wealth rooted in discrimination). Indeed in making frequent recourse to the adjective "narrow" in chastising a politics that roots inequality

in economic exploitation, antiracists and identitarians have positioned the idea of racial justice as a critique of, rather than an expected consequence of, socialism. It is largely for this reason that, as Walter Benn Michaels has noted...‘the commitment to identity politics has been more an expression of...enthusiasm for the free market than a form of resistance to it (Warren et al. 2016).

Even when its proponents believe themselves to be radicals, this antiracist politics is a professional-managerial class politics. Its adherents are not concerned with trying to generate the large, broad political base needed to pursue a transformative agenda because they are committed fundamentally to pursuit of racial parity within neoliberalism, not social transformation. In fact, antiracist activists’ and pundits’ insistence during the 2016 election campaign that Bernie Sanders did not address black concerns made that point very clearly because every nearly item on the Sanders campaign’s policy agenda—from the Robin Hood tax on billionaires to free public higher education to the \$15/h minimum wage, a single-payer health care system, etc. (Sanders for President)—would disproportionately benefit black and Hispanic populations that are disproportionately working class.

Most of all, the gains that black Americans have won have been the product of alliances condensed around broad egalitarian agendas. Historian Touré F. Reed notes:

Emancipation and even Reconstruction were produced by a convergence of interests among disparate constituencies—African Americans, abolitionists, business, small freeholders, and northern laborers—united under the banner of free labor. The civil rights movement was the product of a consensus created by the New Deal that presumed the appropriateness of government intervention in private affairs for the public good, the broad repudiation of scientific racism following World War II, and the political vulnerabilities Jim Crow created for the United States during the Cold War. To be sure, Reconstruction, the New Deal, the War on Poverty, and even the civil rights movement failed to redress all of the challenges confronting blacks. But the limitations of each of these movements reflected political constraints imposed on them, in large part, by capital (Reed 2018).

As A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and two generations of labor-oriented black activists—including the entire spectrum of radical to conservative black civic elites and trade union leaders collected in historian Rayford Logan’s 1944 volume, *What the Negro Wants*—understood, first, the exploitation and oppression of black Americans was linked to more general dynamics of exploitation and oppression and, second, the only way to attain and especially to secure benefits for black Americans is to win them for everyone. That lesson has been lost for many antiracist activists and commentators enamored with contemporary race reductionism; instead, they channel the performative militance associated with Black Power politics as the insurgent, racially authentic tendency in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Yet Black Power politics consolidated as a less potentially transformative, class-skewed alternative to the black-labor-left, social-democratic approach advocated by Rustin, Randolph, and others (A. Philip Randolph Institute 1966; Randolph 2014a, b; Rustin 1965, 1966; Reed 2015, 2016a, 2017a; Le Blanc and Yates 2013; Logan 1944). Black Power politics was fundamentally a petition politics, albeit a loud and flamboyant one. For all their overheated rhetoric about self-determination, including even in some cases what now might be called cosplay fantasies of armed struggle, Black Powerites generally depended on ruling class largess for realization of their programmatic objectives. That was their alternative to trying

to form broad, popular coalitions and to navigate the compromises and constraints that sort of politics requires. As a practical politics, Black Power was fundamentally directed toward government institutions, private or philanthropic funding sources, and other agencies capable of conferring or ratifying claims to represent a generic “black community” (some referred to the style at the time as “militant begging”; I suppose today it could be considered an institutional species of aggressive panhandling.) Contemporaneous critics like Harold Cruse (1968, 193–260) and Robert L. Allen (1969) pointed out the Black Power program’s class character, and Rustin presciently suggested that its most likely outcome would be “creation of a *new black establishment*” (1966, 36) (emphasis in original).

Black Power, at least in the ethnic pluralist form in which it congealed as “black politics,” was at bottom a Bookerite politics of elite-brokerage, as is the essence of ethnic pluralism. The core Bookerite project, under the rubric of racial uplift or advancement, has always been—since Washington and the stratum of black racial advocates that emerged from the context of disfranchisement at the turn of the twentieth century—“substitution of black professionals, managers, and intellectuals for their white counterparts within those institutions charged with administering to the needs of black populations.” The political goal, that is, was establishment of “managerial authority of the nation’s Negro problem” within whatever larger political and economic order prevailed (Warren 2003, 27). Warren’s critique, which he elaborated further in *What Was African American Literature* (2012), sheds light on contemporary antiracists’ singular commitment to the reductionist view that race/racism is the foundation and source of all injustice and inequality affecting black Americans. It also thus helps to make sense of the affective power that explaining current inequalities through analogy to slavery or Jim Crow has in antiracist discourse.

Antiracist politics is a class politics; it is rooted in the social position and worldview, and material interests of the stratum of race relations engineers and administrators who operate in Democratic party politics and as government functionaries, the punditry and commentariat, education administration and the professoriate, corporate, social service and nonprofit sectors, and the multibillion-dollar diversity industry. That stratum comes together around a common-sense commitment to the centrality of race—and other categories of ascriptive identity—as the appropriate discursive framework through which to articulate norms of justice and injustice and through which to formulate remedial responses. It has grown and become deeply embedded institutionally throughout the society as an entailment of the victories of the 1960s. As the society moves farther away from the regime of subordination and exclusion on explicitly racial terms to which race-reductionist explanations were an immediately plausible response, race has become less potent as the dominant metaphor, or blanket shorthand, through which class hierarchy is lived. And as black and white elites increasingly go through the same schools, live in the same neighborhoods, operate as peers in integrated workplaces, share and interact in the same social spaces and consumption practices and preferences, they increasingly share another common sense not only about frameworks of public policy but also about the proper order of things in general.

Those quotidian realities put pressure on the reductionist premise that racial subordination remains the dominant ideological or material framework generating and sustaining systemically reproduced inequalities and class power. This tension underlies a source the appeal of ontological views of racism as an animate force that transcends time and context. Because it is an evanescent Evil that is disconnected from specific human purposes and patterns of social relations, racism, again like “terrorism,” can exist anywhere at any time under any manifest conditions and is a cause that needs no causes or explanation. That is why statistical

demonstration of apparent racial disparities seems within antiracist discourse to be self-sufficient evidence of the persistence of racism's paramount impact on black Americans, despite the fact that findings of disparity: (1) are not surprising considering how entrenched inequalities work; (2) do not tell us much, if anything, about the proximate sources of the disparities; and (3) do not point to remedial responses, although those retailing the findings often present them as though they do. As Chowkwanyun and I indicate, moreover, relentless commitment to finding disparities and insistence that manifest inequalities be understood in those terms despite those interpretive failings suggests the presence of other ideological factors:

[Disparitarian discourse's] commitment to a fundamentally essentialist and ahistorical race-first view is betrayed in the constantly expanding panoply of neologisms – “institutional racism,” “systemic racism,” “structural racism,” “colourblind racism,” “post-racial racism,” etc. – intended to graft more complex social dynamics onto a simplistic and frequently psychologistic racism/antiracism political ontology. Indeed, these efforts bring to mind [Thomas] Kuhn's account of attempts to accommodate mounting anomalies to salvage an interpretive paradigm in danger of crumbling under a crisis of authority. And in this circumstance as well the salvage effort is driven by powerful material and ideological imperatives (Reed and Chowkwanyun 2012, 167).

That ontological view of racism is what enabled Bell's insistence that nothing has changed for black Americans since 1865 without having to confront apparently disconfirming evidence of his own biography and the context of his declaration. It also underlies the preference for invoking historical analogies in lieu of argument. The point of those analogies is not to explain the mechanisms through which contemporary inequalities are reproduced. It is to preserve the interpretive framework that identifies racism as the definitive source of those inequalities.

Antiracism's class character helps to understand why its adherents are so intensely committed to it even though it is so deeply flawed analytically and has generated so little popular traction politically. One layer of its appeal derives simply from habit buttressed with a simulacrum of familiarity engendered by the naïve conceptions of black political history that prompted Willie Legette's deathless observation that “The only thing that hasn't changed about black politics since 1965 is how we think about it” (Warren et al. 2016). People think about black politics as a unitary, transhistorical “freedom movement” or “liberation struggle” because that is how scholarly and popular discussion of black Americans' political activity has been framed almost universally since the academic study of black politics and political thought took shape during the 1950s and 1960s, and especially after the institutionalization of black studies as a field of study in the academic mainstream through the 1970s to 1990s. The guild interest in carving out and protecting the boundaries of a field of study and interpretive authority over its subject matter converges with the broader class interest in maintaining managerial and interpretive authority in the political economy of race relations (Reed 2004).

Crucial to making sense of the current political moment and how to navigate the real perils that face us after November 2016 is recognition that, no matter how it may have been aligned in the past, antiracist politics now is fundamentally antagonistic to a left politics of broadly egalitarian social transformation. Key elements of the black professional-managerial strata have been embedded in and are agents and minions of what we now call neoliberalism—as public functionaries, contractors, and aspirants—since its emergence in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1980s and 1990s, underclass ideology rationalized claims to a special tutelary role for the black professional-managerial class in relation to a rank-and-file black population that that

politics rendered invisible as postal workers, teachers, truck drivers, carpenters, clerks, warehouse workers, electricians or line workers, nurses, cable technicians, etc. or members of a constantly expanding industrial reserve army and represented as an undifferentiated mass to be ventriloquized and “uplifted.” Underclass ideology came with a remedy of inculcating “personal responsibility,” which conveniently permits public officials to deflect concerns with retreat from social service provision and other social wage policies in an era increasingly defined by regressive transfer. Neoliberal privatization also has produced greatly expanded commercial and career opportunities for black (and Latino, female, etc.) entrepreneurs under the rubric of community “empowerment,” “role modeling,” or “social entrepreneurialism” in a vast third sector economy driven by a nonprofit sector likely as not committed to privatizing public goods in the name of localist authenticity and doing well by doing good, as well as the steadily growing diversity industry. These developments legitimize an ideal of social justice shriveled to little more than enhancement of opportunity for individual upward mobility—within the strictures of neoliberal accumulation by dispossession.

Black professional-managerial class embeddedness has become increasingly solidified with the Clinton/Obama/Emanuel wing of the Democratic party’s aggressive commitment to a left-neoliberalism centered on advancement of Wall Street and Silicon Valley economic interests and strong support for social justice defined in identity group terms. But that is necessarily a notion of social justice and equality that is disconnected from political economy and the capitalist class dynamics that generate the most profound inequalities in the society. And militant opposition to conventional left norms of justice that center on economic equality unites the Clintonite neoliberal Democrats and race-reductionist antiracists. In this regard, the most telling moments of the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination campaign included when the random, self-selected Black Lives Matter activists attacked Sanders for supposedly not declaring his opposition to racism in a way that suited their tastes and when former civil rights movement icon Rep. John Lewis (D-GA) and other prominent black functionaries denounced Sanders’s calls for greatly expanding social wage policy and shifting national priorities toward addressing the needs of working people as irresponsible. Perhaps most telling of all, though, was when and most of all *how* Hillary Clinton blithely and disingenuously blew off Sanders’s concerns with economic injustice. On the eve of the Nevada primary, she declared to a rally of her supporters “Not everything is about an economic theory, right? If we broke up the big banks tomorrow – and I will, if they deserve it, if they pose a systemic risk, I will – would that end racism? Would that end sexism? Would that end discrimination against the LGBT community? Would that make people feel more welcoming to immigrants overnight? Would that solve our problem with voting rights, and Republicans who are trying to strip them away from people of color, the elderly, the young?” (Weigel 2016).

Since the election, that alliance against class politics has become even more aggressive in red-baiting Sanders and the left via a new sort of race-baiting—attacking socialism, and advocates of socialism or social-democratic politics, as racist or white supremacist. It has closed ranks around condemnation of working-class whites who voted for Trump as loathsome and irredeemable racists with whom political solidarity is indefensible and in the process reducing “working class” to a white racial category and synonym for backwardness and bigotry. Antiracists and neoliberal Democrats unite in high moral dudgeon to denounce suggestions that more than racism operated to generate the Trump vote and that some working people, particularly those whom Les Leopold describes as Obama/Sanders/Trump voters—and not necessarily only white ones—felt betrayed by both parties (Leopold 2017; Lopez 2016; Parenti 2016; Edwards-Levy 2017; Shepard 2017; Skelley 2017; Cohn 2017). The practical

upshot of that moral stance is that there can be no political alternative outside neoliberalism. That is why it is important, as we look toward the daunting prospect of building a movement capable of changing the terms of debate in American politics to center the interests and concerns of working people—of all races, genders, sexual orientations, and whatever immigration status—who are the vast majority of the country, that we recognize that race-reductionist politics is the left wing of neoliberalism and nothing more. It is openly antagonistic to the idea of a solidaristic left. It is more important than ever to acknowledge that reality and act accordingly.

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