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Racial Ideology

Even in the discourses of identity politics that present race as a fixed entity, it is a remarkably difficult category to pin down. One of the most bewildering expressions of its slipperiness is the reaction to people of color who criticize identity politics. I am frequently placed on lists of “white socialists” who fail to take race seriously, for example. Of course, this isn’t unique to identity politics. Whites have a tendency to assume that anyone who is interacting with them socially and is “clean” and “articulate,” as Joe Biden said of Barack Obama, must also be included in the category of “white.” I remember being told by a white person at an Ethiopian bar in Philadelphia that it was disturbing how all the “people of color” were segregated into the other room. It seemed to me that the bar’s Ethiopian patrons were perfectly happy to watch soccer undisturbed by patronizing white liberals; I, on the other hand, was rather disturbed that my presence, and the presence of many other friends who were people of color, had been deemed insignificant.

The most disturbing part, of course, is that this whitewashing is not applied consistently. It did not happen when I flew back to JFK Airport on Turkish Airlines and every man with a Muslim name was led by armed guards to an ominous room in the back, where we waited for hours to be interviewed about our travel plans. It has taken me many years to get comfortable with not shaving before every flight.

In social movements, these inconsistent practices are a source not just of personal discomfort but also of organizing errors. I remember a political meeting in which a man rambled

about how he didn't "see any brown people in the room." The black comrade and I who were sitting directly across from him looked at each other incredulously.

How is it that a category that identity politics takes to be a fixed essence turns out to be so indeterminate? Indeed, how can something that is absolutely visible and obvious, right before our eyes, still manage to escape our grasp? Althusser pointed out that obviousness is one of the primary features of ideology; when something appears to us to be obvious, like the notion that human beings must compete with each other to gain access to what they need for survival, we know we are in the world of ideology.

There is no intrinsic reason for organizing human beings on the basis of characteristics that ideology tells us are "racial." The ideology of race claims that we can categorize people according to specific physical characteristics, which usually revolve around skin color. But this is an arbitrary form of classification that only has any meaning at all because it has social effects.

Racism equates these social effects of the categorization of people with biological qualities. Such a reduction of human culture to biology is generally rejected and viewed as abhorrent. But it is possible to reject racism while still falling victim to the ideology of race. Taking the category of a race as a given, as a foundation for political analysis, still reproduces this ideology. This is not innocent, because in fact the ideology of race is produced by racism, not the other way around.

There are many instances of the phenomenon of race, and they are all quite different. In order to understand how they operate, we have to talk about these instances in their specificity. Consider the following examples: Spanish settler colonialism and Dutch settler colonialism; English colonialism in India and Japanese colonialism in Korea; ethnic conflict in postcolonial Africa and ethnic conflict in the post-socialist Balkans. All of these examples are caught up with various

ideologies of race. But we gain nothing by reducing these concrete instances to a single abstraction, which we then try to explain in isolation from the specific circumstances. As I have already suggested, the better way of proceeding is to recognize that this abstraction of “race” is already an active component of our ways of understanding the world, but to explain it by adding back all the specific, concrete factors that have generated it—moving from our thoughts to the material world and its history.

We also have to break with the presumption that “race” only describes what is different, secondary, and “Other.” The primordial form of “race” is the “white race,” and we cannot accept it as the neutral, universal standpoint from which a theory of race as “difference” is advanced. In the discourses of identity politics, the category of the white race is rarely theorized because it is instrumentalized as the basis for white privilege. The history of this term is a contradictory one. It is usually associated with white author Peggy McIntosh and her influential article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” Here, in a well-intentioned attempt to encourage more civilized behavior among whites, we see a clear example of an idealist movement from the concrete to the abstract.

Of course, McIntosh was not the first to try to describe the consequences of whiteness. W.E.B. Du Bois famously wrote of the legal and social advantages granted to whites in *Black Reconstruction*:

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts,

dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them.¹

However, McIntosh's article operates at a very different register from Du Bois's historical investigation of the class composition of the postbellum United States. This is because McIntosh refers throughout her article, interchangeably, to "my race," "my racial group," and "my skin color." The first "white privilege" she names is: "I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time." Another is that she can "go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented."²

We will set aside what appears to be a lack of familiarity with the history of American popular music. What is significant is the equation of skin color, the category of "race," and discrete groupings of human beings.

With this equation, white guilt reproduces the founding fiction of race: that there is a biological foundation, expressed in physical phenotypes, for separate groups of human beings who have separate cultures and forms of life. The "white race" as a specific historical formation is obscured by the metaphor of the knapsack.

McIntosh writes: "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks."³ The knapsack is carried by an individual navigating an entirely open social field. It contains tools that enable the individual to navigate this field with greater effectiveness than those whose knapsacks are comparatively empty. The resources contained in the knapsack constitute whiteness as privilege, because the knapsack is carried by an individual who belongs to the white identity.

If the knapsack of privileges is carried by an individual already identifiable as white, then whiteness must necessarily be understood as a biological trait. The falseness of this notion is evident: the people who are currently described as white have a wide and complex range of genetic lineages, many of which were previously considered to be separate “races” of their own. As Nell Irvin Painter points out in her revelatory *The History of White People*, “For most of the past centuries—when race really came down to matters of law—educated Americans firmly believed in the existence of more than one European race.”⁴

We might conclude that there has only been a minor error of description: in reality, whiteness itself is constituted by the contents of the knapsack. The constitution of whiteness as identity and its constitution as privilege are simultaneous: the knapsack’s provisions confer not only advantages but also identity upon its bearer.

But how do we know, then, that the content of the identity conferred has something to do with “whiteness”? Surely, in addition to the specific items conferring a privilege, one would find in any knapsack of identity an infinity of arbitrary details: hair length, gait, dietary preference, computer skills, etc. That is, in order to describe an individual’s identity, the knapsack would have to contain everything constituting the this-ness of that particular individual. It would offer us no insight as to the organizing principle that constitutes these traits as something which can be called “white.” There would be no way to distinguish “white” characteristics from human ones, Pennsylvanian ones, or heavy-metal ones.

This is the failure of liberal thought. A political formation such as whiteness cannot be explained by starting with an individual’s identity—the reduction of politics to the psychology of the self. The starting point will have to be the social structure and its constitutive relations, within which individuals are composed. And it is too often forgotten that decades

before McIntosh's knapsack, the term *white privilege* originated with such a theory.

The theory of "white-skin privilege" was advanced by members of an early antirevisionist split-off from the Communist Party USA (the Provisional Organizing Committee), and would come to have an enormous influence on the New Left and the New Communist Movement. A series of essays by Theodore Allen and Noel Ignatiev, collected as the pamphlet *White Blindspot*, offered the initial formulation. Ignatiev and Allen's argument was that the legacy of slavery was the imposition of white supremacy by the ruling class as an instrument of class division and social control. But this was a political theory, not a cultural or moral one, and it held that "white chauvinism" was actually detrimental to white workers, preventing unity with black workers. So fighting against white supremacy was in fact a central part of a political program that favored the self-organization of all workers. Ignatiev argued vehemently that "the ending of white supremacy is not solely a demand of the Negro people, separate from the class demands of the entire working class." It could not be left to black workers to fight against white supremacy as their own "special" issue, while white workers did little more than express sympathy and "fight for their 'own' demands." The fight against white supremacy was central to the class struggle at a fundamental level:

The ideology of white chauvinism is bourgeois poison aimed primarily at the white workers, utilized as a weapon by the ruling class to subjugate black and white workers. It has its material base in the practice of white supremacy, which is a crime not merely against non-whites but against the entire proletariat. Therefore, its elimination certainly qualifies as one of the class demands of the entire working class. In fact, considering the role that this vile practice has historically played in holding back the struggle of the American working

class, the fight against white supremacy becomes the central immediate task of the entire working class.⁵

As this language was taken up by the New Left, however, it went through considerable ideological transformations. The manifesto, “You Don’t Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows,” circulated at the turbulent Students for a Democratic Society conference of 1969, proposed a politics centered on white guilt rather than proletarian unity. The Weather Underground used the language of “privilege” to reject the working class as a force for revolutionary change, writing, “Virtually all of the white working class also has short-range privileges from imperialism, which are not false privileges but very real ones which give them an edge of vested interest and tie them to a certain extent to the imperialists.”⁶ In practice, this meant that the Weather Underground equated political struggle with vanguard groups like itself, who attacked their own privilege by adopting a revolutionary life-style. What this amounted to was the self-flagellation (with explosives) of white radicals, who substituted themselves for the masses and narcissistically centered attention on themselves instead of the black and Third World movements they claimed to be supporting—reducing those movements to a romantic fantasy of violent insurrection. In other words, the project of black autonomy and self-liberation—which implied the overall self-liberation of the poor and the working class—was effectively ignored by the Weather Underground’s race thinking.

Ignatiev ruthlessly attacked the Weatherman problematic in a paper called “Without a Science of Navigation We Cannot Sail in Stormy Seas,” which is today a jarring discovery:

White supremacy is the real secret of the rule of the bourgeoisie and the hidden cause behind the failure of the labor movement in this country. White-skin privileges serve only the

bourgeoisie, and precisely for that reason they will not let us escape them, but instead pursue us with them through every hour of our life, no matter where we go. They are poison bait.

This view of white supremacy entailed a very different conception of the politics of white privilege, as Ignatiev elaborated:

To suggest that the acceptance of white-skin privilege is in the interests of white workers is equivalent to suggesting that swallowing the worm with the hook in it is in the interests of the fish. To argue that repudiating these privileges is a “sacrifice” is to argue that the fish is making a sacrifice when it leaps from the water, flips its tail, shakes its head furiously in every direction and throws the barbed offering.⁷

Today’s privilege politics cannot possibly permit a position of this kind. We are instead left with endless variations on the Weatherman position, though without the appeals to armed struggle, bank robberies, and Lenin’s theory of imperialism. When contemporary white liberals adapt the Weatherman position, they often end up claiming that a new wave of “pro-white” socialists has arisen to defend the “white working class.” But their caricature obscures the important point, made by black revolutionaries throughout American history, that the project of emancipation requires overcoming the ideology of race. Although he characterized the material advantages of whiteness as a “psychological wage,” W.E.B. Du Bois did not reduce whiteness to an effect of individual psychology. In fact, immediately preceding the passage on the psychological wage, Du Bois wrote:

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.⁸

When Du Bois suggested that white and black workers have “practically identical interests,” he was not making an appeal to some mythical “white working class.” Still less was he guilty of some kind of “class reductionism,” which decides in the abstract that class is more fundamental than race. Of course, some people really do make this argument—and they play right into the hands of identitarian liberals, who ask how the young woman seeking an abortion and the evangelical protester, the undocumented immigrant and the salaried worker, can possibly have the same “interests.”

But this challenge is afflicted by the same condition it claims to diagnose. It mistakes the casual description of a shared trait for a claim about identity. We all have numerous interests that are related to our identities but also to where we work and where we live. To say that these different spheres of life interact and intersect is a banal truism which explains neither how our society is structured and reproduced nor how we might formulate a strategy to change this structure.

Du Bois was recognizing the lived reality of the working class, which contains white people and people of color, people of all genders and sexualities, the employed and the unemployed—a multitude of people irreducible to any single description. A meaningful common interest between them does not somehow exist by default. We cannot reduce any group of people and the multitudes they contain to a single common interest, as though we were reducing a fraction. A common interest is constituted by the composition of these multitudes into a group. This is a process of political practice.

White supremacy is the phenomenon whereby the plurality of interests of a group of people is reorganized into the fiction of a white race whose very existence is predicated on the

violent and genocidal history of the oppression of people of color. The self-organized struggles of oppressed people against white supremacy have managed to significantly undermine, though by no means eliminate, this kind of organization.

It was no accident that these struggles ultimately put forward the insight that it was necessary to constitute a common interest through class organization, which extends to an opposition to the whole capitalist system—because it is the structure of the capitalist system that prevents all people who are dispossessed of the means of production, regardless of their identities, from having control over their own lives and thus from pursuing whatever interests they may have, in all their particularity.

This does not mean, however, that a “class reductionist” argument is a viable position. As long as racial solidarity among whites is more powerful than class solidarity across races, both capitalism and whiteness will continue to exist. In the context of American history, the rhetoric of the “white working class” and positivist arguments that class matters more than race reinforce one of the main obstacles to building socialism.

Allen and Ignatiev turned to this question in their further research, inspired by the insights of Du Bois. In the process they presented an exemplary model of a materialist investigation into the ideology of race, one that went from the abstract to the concrete. This work emerged alongside that of Barbara Fields and Karen Fields, David Roediger, and many others as a body of thought devoted to exposing race as a social construct. All of this research, in varying ways, has examined the history of the “white race” in its specificity. The guiding insight that must be drawn from it is that this racial phenomenon is not simply a biological or even cultural attribute of certain “white people”: it was produced by white supremacy in a concrete and objective historical process. As Allen put it on the back cover of his extraordinary vernacular history *The*

Invention of the White Race: “When the first Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619, there were no white people there.”

At the most immediate level, Allen was pointing to the fact that the word *white* didn’t appear in Virginia colonial law until 1691. Of course, this doesn’t mean that there was no racism before 1691. Allen’s argument was to show that racism was not attached to a concept of the white race. There were ideas of the superiority of European civilization, but this did not correspond to differences in skin color.

The clearest example is that of the Irish, whose racial oppression by the English precedes their racial oppression of Africans by several centuries. Today white nationalists distort this history, attempting to use the racial oppression of the Irish to try to dismiss the history of white supremacy. Yet this example actually demolishes their entire framework. What the example of the Irish illustrates is a form of racial oppression that is not based on skin color and that in fact precedes the very category of whiteness.

Indeed, the early forms of English racial ideology represented the Irish as inferior and subhuman, and this ideology was later repeated word for word to justify both the genocide of Indigenous people in the Americas and the enslavement of Africans. Nor was it only a matter of words: the very practices of settler colonialism, land seizures, and plantation production were established in Ireland. Allen demonstrates this with reference to specific laws:

If under Anglo-American slavery, “the rape of a female slave was not a crime, but a mere trespass on the master’s property,” so, in 1278, two Anglo-Normans, brought into court and charged with raping Margaret O’Rorke were found not guilty because “the said Margaret is an Irishwoman.” If a law enacted in Virginia in 1723, provided that, “manslaughter of a slave is not punishable,” so under Anglo-Norman law it sufficed for acquittal to show that the victim in a slaying was

Irish. Anglo-Norman priests granted absolution on the grounds that it was “no more sin to kill an Irishman than a dog or any other brute.”⁹

So racial oppression arises in the Irish case without skin color as its basis. We are forced to ask how we end up with a racial ideology revolving around skin color that represents African people as subhuman and that considers both Irish and English to be part of a unitary “white race.”

The historical record quite clearly demonstrates that white supremacy and thus the white race are formed within the American transition to capitalism, specifically because of the centrality of racial slavery. However, we have to resist the temptation, imposed on us by racial ideology, to explain slavery through race. Slavery is not always racial. It existed in ancient Greece and Rome and also in Africa, and was not attached specifically to a racial ideology. Slavery is a form of forced labor characterized by the market exchange of the laborer. But there are various forms of forced labor, and its first form in Virginia was indentured labor, in which a laborer is forced to work for a limited period of time to work off a debt, often with some incentive like land ownership after the end of the term. The first Africans to arrive in Virginia 1619 were put to work as indentured servants, within the same legal category as European indentured servants. In fact, until 1660 all African American laborers, like their European American counterparts, were indentured servants who had limited terms of servitude. There was no legal differentiation based on racial ideology: free African Americans owned property, land, and sometimes indentured servants of their own. There were examples of intermarriage between Europeans and Africans. It was only in the late seventeenth century that the labor force of the American colonies shifted decisively to African slaves who did not have limits on their terms of servitude.

As Painter points out in *The History of White People*, these forms of labor and their transformations are fundamental in understanding how racial ideology comes about:

Work plays a central part in race talk, because the people who do the work are likely to be figured as inherently deserving the toil and poverty of laboring status. It is still assumed, wrongly, that slavery anywhere in the world must rest on a foundation of racial difference. Time and again, the better classes have concluded that those people deserve their lot; it must be something within them that puts them at the bottom. In modern times, we recognize this kind of reasoning as it relates to black race, but in other times the same logic was applied to people who were white, especially when they were impoverished immigrants seeking work.¹⁰

“In sum,” Painter writes, “before an eighteenth-century boom in the African slave trade, between one-half and two-thirds of all early white immigrants to the British colonies in the Western Hemisphere came as unfree laborers, some 300,000 to 400,000 people.”¹¹ The definitions of whiteness as freedom and blackness as slavery did not yet exist.

It turns out that defining race involves answering some unexpected historical questions: How did some indentured servants come to be forced into bondage for their entire lives rather than a limited term? How did this category of forced labor come to be represented in terms of race? Why did the colonial ruling class come to rely on racial slavery when various other regimes of labor were available?

The first economic boom of the American colonies was in Virginia tobacco production in the 1620s, and it was based on the labor of primarily European indentured servants. African Americans were only about a fifth of the labor force: most forced labor was initially European, and the colonial planter class relied on this forced labor for its economic growth. But

they couldn't just rely on European indentured labor because it was based on voluntary migration, and the incentive to participate in a life of brutal labor and die early was not sufficient to generate a consistently growing workforce. As Barbara Fields puts it, "Neither white skin nor English nationality protected servants from the grossest forms of brutality and exploitation. The only degradation they were spared was perpetual enslavement along with their issue in perpetuity, the fate that eventually befell the descendants of Africans."¹²

African Americans, on the other hand, had been forcibly removed from their homelands. So the ruling class began to alter its laws to be able to deny some laborers an end to their terms of servitude, which they were only able to accomplish in the case of African laborers. What really changed everything was Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. This began as a conflict within the elite planter class, directed toward a brutal attack on the Indigenous population. But it also gave rise to a rebellious mob of European and African laborers, who burned down the capital city of Jamestown and forced the governor to flee. The insurrectionary alliance of European and African laborers was a fundamental existential threat to the colonial ruling class, and the possibility of such an alliance among exploited peoples had to be prevented forever.

Here we see a watershed moment in the long and complex process of the invention of the white race as a form of social control. The ruling class shifted its labor force decisively toward African slaves, and thus avoided dealing with the demand of indentured servants for eventual freedom and landownership. It fortified whiteness as a legal category, the basis for denying an end to the term of servitude for African forced labor. By the eighteenth century the Euro-American planter class had entered into a bargain with the Euro-American laboring classes, who were mostly independent subsistence farmers: it exchanged certain social privileges for a cross-class alliance of Euro-Americans to preserve a

superexploited African labor force. This Euro-American racial alliance was the best defense of the ruling class against the possibility of a Euro-American and African American working-class alliance. It is at this point, Nell Painter concludes, that we see the “now familiar equation that converts race to black and black to slave.”¹³

The invention of the white race further accelerated when the Euro-American ruling class encountered a new problem in the eighteenth century. As the colonial ruling class began to demand its independence from the divinely ordained executives and landed wealth of the English nobility, they made claims for the intrinsic equality of all people and the idea of natural rights. As Barbara Fields puts it:

Racial ideology supplied the means of explaining slavery to people whose terrain was a republic founded on radical doctrines of liberty and natural rights, and, more important, a republic in which those doctrines seemed to represent accurately the world in which all but a minority lived. Only when the denial of liberty became an anomaly apparent even to the least observant and reflective members of Euro-American society did ideology systematically explain the anomaly.¹⁴

In other words, the Euro-American ruling class had to advance an ideology of the inferiority of Africans in order to rationalize forced labor, and they had to incorporate European populations into the category of the white race, despite the fact that many of these populations had previously been considered inferior.

This racial ideology developed further as the new American nation encountered the phenomenon of the voluntary migration of free laborers from Europe, many of whom came from populations that were viewed as distinct European races: the Italians, Eastern Europeans, and Jews, but especially the exemplary case of the Irish, whose emigration to the US spiked with

the famines of the mid-nineteenth century produced by English colonialism.

The Irish, among the most oppressed and rebellious groups in Europe, were offered the bargain that had protected the American ruling class. Frederick Douglass pointed this out very clearly in 1853, at the anniversary meeting of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in New York:

The Irish, who, at home, readily sympathize with the oppressed everywhere, are instantly taught when they step upon our soil to hate and despise the Negro. They are taught to believe that he eats the bread that belongs to them. The cruel lie is told them, that we deprive them of labor and receive the money which would otherwise make its way into their pockets. Sir, the Irish-American will find out his mistake one day.¹⁵

Douglass had gone to Ireland to avoid being returned to slavery and said he was for the first time in his life treated as an ordinary person, exclaiming in a letter to the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, "I breathe, and lo! the chattel becomes a man . . . I meet nothing to remind me of my complexion."¹⁶ Of course, this was not because of some intrinsic kindness of the Irish. It was rather because, at this stage in history, there were no white people there. This was clear to Douglass because he arrived during the Great Famine. Writing in his memoirs of the songs sung by slaves on the American plantations, he added: "Nowhere outside of dear old Ireland, in the days of want and famine, have I heard sounds so mournful."¹⁷

But what Irish immigrants realized after immigrating to the United States is that they could ameliorate their subjugation by joining the club of the white race, as Ignatiev has recounted.¹⁸ They could become members of a "white race" with higher status if they actively supported the continuing enslavement and oppression of African Americans. So the process of becoming white meant that these previous racial categories were

abolished and racialized groups like the Irish were progressively incorporated into the white race as a means of fortifying and intensifying the exploitation of black laborers.

It was the great insight of Frederick Douglass to describe this as the Irish-American's mistake. Douglass clearly emphasized the novelty of the very description of people as white: "The word *white* is a modern term in the legislation of this country. It was never used in the better days of the Republic, but has sprung up within the period of our national degeneracy."¹⁹ Let us be clear on what the invention of the white race meant. It meant that Euro-American laborers were prevented from joining with African American laborers in rebellion, through the form of social control imposed by the Euro-American ruling class. In exchange for white-skin privilege, the Euro-American workers accepted white identity and became active agents in the brutal oppression of African American laborers. But they also fundamentally degraded their own conditions of existence. As a consequence of this bargain with their exploiters, they allowed the conditions of the Southern white laborer to become the most impoverished in the nation, and they generated conditions that blocked the development of a viable mass workers' movement.

This is why the struggle against white supremacy has in fact been a struggle for universal emancipation—something that was apparent to African American insurgents. As Barbara Fields points out, these insurgents did not use a notion of race as an explanation for their oppression or their struggles for liberation:

It was not Afro-Americans . . . who needed a racial explanation; it was not they who invented themselves as a race. Euro-Americans resolved the contradiction between slavery and liberty by defining Afro-Americans as a race; Afro-Americans resolved the contradiction more straightforwardly by calling for the abolition of slavery. From the era of the

American, French and Haitian revolutions on, they claimed liberty as theirs by natural right.²⁰

However, this was not always recognized by socialist movements. Early American socialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sometimes failed to recognize that the division between white and black workers prevented all workers from successfully emancipating themselves. We should not oversimplify this point or use it to discredit the whole history of the labor movement. The early socialist parties were largely composed of immigrants who were often not yet fully incorporated into the white race, and there were very significant black socialists—including, for example, Hubert Harrison, who played an important role in connecting black nationalism to socialism at the beginning of the twentieth century. The majority of the early American socialists were not racists, and in fact openly and vigorously opposed racism.

However, most of these early socialist organizations failed to recognize that there was anything unique about the demands of black workers. They were also willing to work with craft unions that discriminated against black workers, and they did not attempt to recruit black members. Without an analysis of white supremacy, these socialist organizations did not address the fact that black workers were often excluded from jobs available to whites, that they were subjected to racist violence beyond the workplace, and that they could not expect racist employers to extend increasing wages to them.

The cost of this indifference to race was that socialism was always competing for recruitment with whiteness. New European immigrants were often very radical and prepared to join militant labor struggles. But they were also being invited to join the white race. Once again, in the case of the Irish, this meant finally leaving behind the racial oppression that had become familiar to them in Europe.

This began to change with the reconfiguration of American socialists into the Communist Party in 1919. By the 1920s the CP had incorporated not only many immigrant socialists but also the clandestine organization called the African Blood Brotherhood, which included many important black Communists, such as Cyril Briggs, Claude McKay, and Harry Haywood. These black Communists were absolutely central to Communist organizing, because they argued that the party would have to directly attack whiteness if it wanted to build a labor movement. As a result of their work, the CP threw itself into antiracist organizing in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

This meant, first of all, placing a heavy emphasis on educating white members to reject white chauvinism, and organizing some of the only interracial social events that were held in the segregated US. The party worked to eliminate the influence of whiteness from the ranks of the party itself. But it also sent its organizers down South and into the black neighborhoods of Northern cities to work on political projects. These included unions for sharecroppers, tenant farmers, miners, and steelworkers; armed defense against lynching; legal defense for black victims of the racist justice system; and movements against unemployment, evictions, and utility shut-offs. Robin D.G. Kelley describes some of these initiatives in *Hammer and Hoe*:

Representatives of the unemployed councils often dissuaded landlords from evicting their tenants by describing the potential devastation that could occur once an abandoned house became a free-for-all for firewood. When a family's electricity was shut off for nonpayment, activists from the unemployed council frequently used heavy-gauge copper wires as "jumpers" to appropriate electricity from public outlets or other homes. Council members also found ways to reactivate water mains after they had been turned off, though the process was

more complicated than pilfering electricity. And in at least one instance, a group of black women used verbal threats to stop a city employee from turning off one family's water supply.²¹

Unfortunately, the complicated history of political disputes within the CP, along with the state repression of the Communist movement, led to this work being cut short. As an increasingly conservative party leadership distanced itself from the project of black liberation, white chauvinism was on the rise in the CP. It had previously been most effectively combated through mass antiracist organizing: by joining different people and disparate demands in a common struggle. But now that this practice had been abandoned, the party launched what Harry Haywood called a "phony war against white chauvinism."

In Haywood's analysis, this phony war only ended up strengthening the material foundations of white chauvinism, now uprooted from its structural foundations and seen as a free-floating set of ideas. Instead of mass organizing, opposing white chauvinism was now seen as a matter of policing the language of those who were ostensibly comrades, thus strengthening the party bureaucracy and introducing a climate of paranoia and distrust among members. As Haywood wrote:

It was an atmosphere which was conducive to the development of a particularly paternalistic and patronizing form of white chauvinism, as well as to a rise in petty-bourgeois narrow nationalism among blacks. The growth of the nationalist side of this distortion was directly linked to the breakdown of the basic division of labor among communists in relation to the national question. This division of labor, long ago established in our party and the international communist movement, places main responsibility for combating white chauvinism on

the white comrades, with Blacks having main responsibility for combating narrow nationalist deviations.²²

In other words, in the absence of mass organizing, racial ideology rushes to the fill the vacuum. And without the political division of labor that Haywood describes, the struggle against racism is reduced to the redress of individual injuries.

Of course, this is why reactions to the critique of identity politics can be so abrasive. When there is no other practical organizational effort to combat racism, any questioning of the framework of identity seems like an attempt to deny the validity of the antiracist struggle. In fact, it goes even deeper than this—questioning racial ideology itself seems to be a denial of the agency of the oppressed. In his landmark book *Against Race*, Paul Gilroy describes how this defensive reaction emerges from the ambivalent relationship oppressed people form with their identities:

People who have been subordinated by race-thinking and its distinctive social structures (not all of which come tidily color-coded) have for centuries employed the concepts and categories of their rulers, owners, and persecutors to resist the destiny that “race” has allocated to them and to dissent from the lowly value it placed upon their lives. Under the most difficult of conditions and from imperfect materials that they surely would not have selected if they had been able to choose, these oppressed groups have built complex traditions of politics, ethics, identity, and culture.

By classifying these traditions within the categories of “race,” their role in the formation of our global modernity has been marginalized, relegated “to the backwaters of the primitive and prepolitical.” Claiming and defending these traditions reinforces racial ideology but also provides a form of defense and protection. The experiences of “insult, brutality, and

contempt” are “unexpectedly turned into important sources of solidarity, joy, and collective strength.” This reversal, as Gilroy goes on to explain, is a powerful factor in the tenacity of racial ideology: “When ideas of racial particularity are inverted in this defensive manner so that they provide sources of pride rather than shame and humiliation, they become difficult to relinquish. For many racialized populations, ‘race’ and the hard-won, oppositional identities it supports are not to be lightly or prematurely given up.”²³ But this dynamic is not only a matter of the conscious self-defense of the oppressed. It is rooted in the unconscious, as ideology always is, and it takes us back to the paradoxical relation between subjectivation and subjection that Judith Butler has shown is so central to ideology and the modern forms of politics. A fundamental aspect of this paradox of the subject, Butler argues, is that it is tied up with a “passionate attachment” to power. This is the kind of attachment that children display toward their parents, who are an arbitrary repressive authority but also the models of selfhood and the first sources of recognition, and therefore the objects of love.

We are constituted as subjects within the individualization that is characteristic of state power; we are activated as political agents through the injuries that are constitutive of our identity. Consequently, our identities attach us to this power in a basic and foundational way. This complicated and unconscious aspect of our political experience is what Butler tries to capture:

Called by an injurious name, I come into social being, and because I have a certain inevitable attachment to my existence, because a certain narcissism takes hold of any term that confers existence, I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially. The self-colonizing trajectory of certain forms of identity politics are symptomatic of this paradoxical embrace of the injurious term.²⁴

As we try to understand the specific form of passionate attachment to racial identity, we have to pass into the nebulous terrain of the unconscious—the terrain of poetry, fantasy, and illusion.

6

Universality

As Ronald Reagan was ushering in the era of neoliberalism, my parents immigrated to the United States from Karachi, Pakistan. Hoping to pursue academic careers in an environment of intellectual freedom and material abundance, they settled in the middle of rural Pennsylvania, where there were no mangos in the supermarket.

In a large crowd of demonstrators at San Francisco International Airport in January 2017, I imagined their arrival. As you would expect at an airport, the crowd was diverse: a global array of nationalities, ages, and dispositions. But in the place of exhaustion and anxiety, this crowd displayed energy and outrage. They shouted loudly, against the “Muslim ban” announced by Donald Trump in his first weeks in office, that *refugees are welcome here*. By sheer numbers they managed to shut down all departing flights. Seeing a young boy there who had fashioned a sign for himself reading “Son of a Refugee,” I thought of how much my own life had been shaped by the flight that brought my parents to this country. I was reminded of everything the Muslim ban threatened to tear apart—not just families, but the lives and dreams of those who have traveled across an ocean in search of a new life.

Many desires spur immigrants to travel, but they are united by what Sandro Mezzadra calls “the right to escape”¹: to escape from poverty and persecution, to discover new geographies, and to speak in new languages. The desire of the immigrant is a world with no borders, a world with no detention, a world in which humans move freely and welcome every

stranger. It is the recognition that it is possible to think, speak, and live otherwise.

Perhaps precisely for this reason, the immigrant represents a core problem for political thought—not a new one engineered by Trump and his associates, but one as old as the nation-state itself. The fundamental contradiction of the nation-state, as Étienne Balibar has pointed out, is the confrontation and reciprocal interaction between two ways of defining the “people.” First, *ethnos*: “an imagined community of membership and filiation.” Second, *demos*: “the collective subject of representation, decision making, and rights.”

The first sense of the “people” internalizes the national border—it is the wall Trump hopes to build inside our heads. It is a feeling of belonging to a “fictive ethnicity,” an imaginary community that is constituted by national borders but in reality consists of heterogeneous populations brought together by migration and movement—a plurality suppressed by the fantasy of a unitary racial and spiritual essence.

The second sense of the “people” is the political one, the one that appears to be manifested in our Bill of Rights. It is meant to apply regardless of identity; it is the song of the Statue of Liberty, which offers its freedoms to all the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, indifferent to their particularities.

The contradiction between these two notions is the original sin of the American nation-state. It is stated in the first sentence of its first official document: “We, the People,” says the preamble of the Constitution, written by slaveowners. As Balibar puts it:

This construction also closely associates the democratic universality of human rights . . . with particular national belonging. This is why the democratic composition of people in the form of the nation led inevitably to systems of exclusion: the divide between “majorities” and “minorities” and, more profoundly still, between populations considered native

and those considered foreign, heterogeneous, who are racially or culturally stigmatized.²

This democratic contradiction came clearly to the surface in the French Revolution, with its Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. In 1843 a young Karl Marx subjected this declaration to critical scrutiny. In "On the Jewish Question," Marx was responding first and foremost to Bruno Bauer's critique of the demand for Jewish emancipation. According to Bauer, any identity, religious or otherwise, was necessarily exclusionary and therefore incompatible with universal emancipation. Demanding the emancipation of the particular identity of the Jew, Bauer argued, reproduced this exclusion, which had been taken to its extreme by the Christian state. Political emancipation would necessarily be universal, and would thus require a kind of disidentification.³

But Marx pointed out that secular political emancipation, the separation of church and state in the name of universal rights, had not actually overcome religious superstition in practice. Famously and prophetically, he cited the United States as an example. This was because rights were granted to individuals, Marx argued, and were therefore the rights of "egoistic man, of man separated from other men and from the community."⁴ Protecting the individual's rights in the political sphere did not mean the end of oppression by religious authorities and the owners of property. Therefore, neither Bauer's abstract and aristocratic universalism nor the particularism of a minority could lead to real human emancipation. This would involve going beyond political emancipation and overcoming the exploitation of the market.

In an essay on Marx's relevance for the analysis of contemporary identity politics, Wendy Brown summarizes his complex argument:

Historically, rights emerged in modernity both as a vehicle of emancipation from political disenfranchisement or

institutionalized servitude and as a means of privileging an emerging bourgeois class within a discourse of formal egalitarianism and universal citizenship. Thus, they emerged both as a means of protection against arbitrary use and abuse by sovereign and social power and as a mode of securing and naturalizing dominant social powers.⁵

This implies a “paradox” for liberalism that persists to this day. When rights are granted to “empty,” abstract individuals, they ignore the real, social forms of inequality and oppression that appear to be outside the political sphere. Yet when the particularities of injured identities are brought into the content of rights, Brown points out, they are “more likely to become sites of the production and regulation of identity as injury than vehicles of emancipation.”⁶ In other words, when the liberal language of rights is used to defend a concrete identity group from injury, physical or verbal, that group ends up defined by its victimhood and individuals end up reduced to their victimized belonging.

Brown shows how this logic undermines the logic behind an influential (albeit controversial) strand of feminism: Catherine MacKinnon’s attempt to redress the masculine bias of the law. MacKinnon’s antipornography feminism was based on the premise that the right to free speech conflicted with the right of women to be free from sexual subordination. But, as Brown asks, “Does a definition of women as sexual subordination, and the encoding of this definition in law, work to liberate women from sexual subordination, or does it, paradoxically, reinscribe femaleness as sexual violability?”⁷ Brown’s critique suggests that when rights are demanded by a particular identity group and the whole horizon of politics is the defense of this category, its members end up fixed as victims. Rights themselves end up reduced to a reaction to an injury inflicted on this victim. Their emancipatory content disappears. So by presenting a legal argument that tries to

give rights a substantial content, the content of particular identities, MacKinnon ends up producing a fixed and passive category of “woman.” The possibility of women organizing themselves against sexual oppression, the kind of organization that implies self-directed mass action, ends up neutralized by a legal discourse.

This is precisely the problem which comes to the forefront in the contemporary “Muslim question.” In France, this question was debated in 2004 when the hijab was outlawed in public schools. The question then became: Should the hijab be defended because Muslims are defined by the fact of wearing it? Does the freedom of the French migrant population consist in a defensive response to the injury inflicted by the banning of the headscarf? Surely, the racism implied by the banning of a Muslim accessory should be condemned and attacked. But to the extent that this is framed as a defense of the rights of Muslims, the perspective of liberal tolerance traps the Muslims it claims to defend within a victimized identity rather than joining them in a project of collective emancipation.

As Alain Badiou points out in his book *Ethics*, this liberal paradigm of rights and the defense of victims is the foundation of imperialism, of so-called “humanitarian intervention.” The civilizing mission of imperialism, the “white man’s burden,” claims to defend the mere physical existence of a people. People are reduced to animals, excluded from politics; because they are unable to act politically on their own, they require the protection of a state. “Who cannot see,” Badiou asks, “that this ethics which rests on the misery of the world hides, behind its victim-Man, the good-Man, the white-Man?” An intervention conducted “in the name of a civilization requires an initial contempt for the situation as a whole, including its victims.” Today’s self-congratulatory discourse of moral responsibility and the ethics of military intervention—coming, Badiou points out, “after decades of courageous critiques of colonialism and imperialism”—amounts to little

more than a “sordid self-satisfaction in the ‘West,’ with the insistent argument according to which the misery of the Third World is the result of its own incompetence, its own inanity—in short, of its subhumanity.”⁸

Is it possible to go beyond the liberal paradigm of victimhood and the paradox of rights? We have a strong historical basis for doing so if we understand this paradox as the expression of a concrete political antagonism, as Massimiliano Tomba does in his comparison of the two versions of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man. The first Declaration of 1789, Tomba argues, grounds rights in a *juridical universalism*: “the universalism that comes from above and that implies a subject of right who is either passive or a victim who requires protection.” Whether it is a woman to be protected from pornographic speech or a Muslim to be protected from religious prejudice, juridical universalism grants no agency to these subjects—their only political existence is mediated by their protection by the state. The 1793 Declaration, in contrast, manifests an *insurgent universality*, one brought onto the historical stage by the slave uprisings of the Haitian Revolution, the intervention of women into the political process that had excluded them, and the demands of the *sans-culottes* for a right to food and life. It “does not presuppose any abstract bearer of rights,” Tomba writes, but instead “refers to particular and concrete individuals—women, the poor, and slaves—and their political and social agency.” Here we encounter a new paradox: “the universality of these particular and concrete individuals acting in their specific situation is more universal than the juridical universalism of the abstract bearers of rights.”⁹

In 1799, the Haitian Revolutionary leader Toussaint L'Ouverture was asked by France to write on the banners of his army, “Brave blacks, remember that the French people alone recognize your liberty and the equality of your rights.” He refused, pointing to the slavery that persisted in France's other colonies, and replied in a letter to Bonaparte: “It is not a

liberty of circumstance, conceded to us alone, that we want; it is the *absolute adoption* of the principle that no man, born red, black, or white, can be the property of his fellow.”¹⁰

It is still possible to claim the legacy of this insurgent universality, which says that we are not passive victims but active agents of a politics that demands freedom for everyone. It was for this reason that I was struck by the beauty of the crowd at the San Francisco Airport: the decision of so many with no personal stake to defend the rights of every immigrant. Those who had nothing to lose but their own comfort and security were there alongside the children of refugees, shouting just as loudly. They brought into being what Badiou calls an “egalitarian maxim proper to any politics of emancipation.”¹¹ It is a maxim that calls unconditionally for the freedom of those who are not like us. And as any immigrant knows, everyone is not like us, and we are not even like ourselves.

Today it is customary to adopt the language that calls groups designated as foreign or alien “the Other”—a relation that is said to enact a reductive degradation. But as Badiou points out in *Ethics*, the Other is already everywhere, even in you:

Infinite alterity is quite simply what there is. Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences. Even the apparently reflexive experience of myself is by no means the intuition of a unity but a labyrinth of differentiations, and Rimbaud was certainly not wrong when he said: “I am another.” There are as many differences, say, between a Chinese peasant and a young Norwegian professional as between myself and anybody at all, including myself.¹²

This seeming paradox was illustrated by a sign one airport protester held that read “Jews Stand with Muslims.” The slogan draws on what Judith Butler describes as “Jewish

resources for the criticism of state violence, the colonial subjugation of populations, expulsion and dispossession,” as well as “Jewish values of cohabitation with the non-Jew that are part of the very ethical substance of diasporic Jewishness.” Support for Muslim refugees can claim a foundation in an ethical tradition that is central to Jewish history. Yet advancing a critique of Israeli colonialism, Butler argues, requires rejecting the claim of “the exceptional ethical resources of Jewishness.”

There is a fundamental ambivalence here. It is the “significant Jewish tradition affirming modes of justice and equality” in which Butler bases her critique of Zionism. But in doing so, the idea of any one tradition’s exceptionality is called into question. To criticize Zionism and affirm justice and equality means going beyond every kind of exceptionalism—it thus “requires the departure from Jewishness as an exclusionary framework for thinking both ethics and politics.”¹³

Those of us of Muslim lineage will have to claim our own ambivalence. We might begin by recalling the Pakistani Marxist poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, who wrote his famous poem “Hum Dekhenge” (“We Shall See”) in 1979, in protest of the Islamic dictatorship of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq. In the tradition of Urdu poetry, Faiz adopted the language of Islam, attacking Zia as an idolater and offering a revolutionary prophecy:

When the cry rings out
 “I am the Truth”
 The truth that I am
 And that you are too
 All of God’s creation will rule
 Which I am
 And you are too

Moving through Islamic language, Faiz was able to point to a politics beyond exceptionalism, a possibility his Marxism provided. We put these politics into practice when we stand

alongside others and act according to the egalitarian maxim. I fight for my own liberation precisely because I fight for that of the stranger.

Indeed, those whom liberal thought reduces to passive victims have always been active agents of politics, the source of insurgent universality. In the words of C.L.R. James: “The struggle of the masses for universality did not begin yesterday.”¹⁴ Paul Gilroy’s groundbreaking book *The Black Atlantic* shows that black radical intellectuals who adopted the heritage of the Enlightenment, as was foreshadowed in the Haitian Revolution, came to articulate a “counterculture of modernity.” This was precisely an example of a foundational alterity that is summed up in the word *diaspora* and bridges between the African and Jewish experiences. Diaspora, Gilroy argues, disrupts “the idea of cultural nationalism” and “the overintegrated conceptions of culture which present immutable, ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of ‘black’ and ‘white’ people.” It forces us to confront a far more difficult and complicated reality: “creolisation, metissage, mestizaje, and hybridity,” which, from “the viewpoint of ethnic absolutism,” are little more than “a litany of pollution and impurity.” But such an ethnic absolutism, Gilroy powerfully shows, obscures the rich cultural legacies that emerge from “processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents.”¹⁵ Combahee member Demita Frazier has pointed out that this excess beyond identity was at work in the Collective’s initial proposal of “identity politics”:

We never actually, as far as I can tell, as far as the classic definition, really practiced what people now call identity politics. Because the centerpiece and the center focus was not an aspect of our identity, but the totality of what it meant to be a Black woman in the diaspora.¹⁶

However, embracing the radical counterculture of modernity does not mean an uncritical embrace of the European Enlightenment. Gilroy criticizes the celebration of European intellectual history as a manifestation of today's "conservative complacency," which romanticizes the European past and "seeks quietly to reinstate the innocent, unreflexive universalisms—liberal, religious, and ethnocentric." The project of insurgent universality is not advanced by purported Marxists who engage in uncritical and ahistorical celebrations of the Enlightenment, an old and tired position. Gilroy points out that these lazy analyses "remain substantially unaffected by the histories of barbarity which appear to be such a prominent feature of the widening gap between modern experience and modern expectation":

There is a scant sense, for example, that the universality and rationality of enlightened Europe and America were used to sustain and relocate rather than eradicate an order of racial difference inherited from the premodern era. The figure of Columbus does not appear to complement the standard pairing of Luther and Copernicus that is implicitly used to mark the limits of this particular understanding of modernity. Locke's colonial interests and the effect of the conquest of the Americas on Descartes and Rousseau are simply non-issues.

In such a reading of modernity, not only are the crimes of enlightened Europe erased, so is the centrality of the Black Atlantic:

In this setting, it is hardly surprising that if it is perceived to be relevant at all, the history of slavery is somehow assigned to blacks. It becomes our special property rather than a part of the ethical and intellectual heritage of the West as a whole. This is only just preferable to the conventional alternative response which views plantation slavery as a premodern

residue that disappears once it is revealed to be fundamentally incompatible with enlightened rationality and capitalist industrial production.¹⁷

A universal position can only be achieved if we are serious about “reckoning with colonial modernity,” if we draw on the Black Atlantic counterculture to put forth what Gilroy calls a “strategic universalism” that goes beyond Europe.¹⁸ Universality does not exist in the abstract, as a prescriptive principle which is mechanically applied to indifferent circumstances. It is created and recreated in the act of insurgency, which does not demand emancipation solely for those who share my identity but for everyone; it says that no one will be enslaved. It equally refuses to freeze the oppressed in a status of victimhood that requires protection from above; it insists that emancipation is self-emancipation.

From the plantation insurrections to the Combahee River Collective, this is a universality that necessarily confronts and opposes capitalism. Anticapitalism is a necessary and indispensable step on this path. As Barbara Smith puts it, invoking a part of the legacy of the Combahee River Collective which must be revived and protected,

The reason Combahee’s Black feminism is so powerful is because it’s anticapitalist. One would expect Black feminism to be antiracist and opposed to sexism. Anticapitalism is what gives it the sharpness, the edge, the thoroughness, the revolutionary potential.¹⁹

C.L.R. James showed that every compromise of *this* kind of universality, every step away from the primacy of insurgency and the revolutionary potential of anticapitalist organization, led back to the particularism of the existing order. This regression could be carried out by any identity, just as the leaders of the Haitian Revolution ultimately imposed wage slavery on

the recently emancipated population. As James put it in *The Black Jacobins*:

Political treachery is not a monopoly of the white race, and this abominable betrayal so soon after the insurrections shows that political leadership is a matter of program, strategy and tactics, and not the color of those who lead it, their oneness of origin with their people, nor the services they have rendered.²⁰

In 1957, James met with Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King in London, as they traveled home from Ghana. James, in the course of writing his book *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution*, listened with great interest to the story of the Montgomery bus boycott in Alabama. He later wrote a letter to King, explaining that he had sent a copy of *The Black Jacobins* to Louis Armstrong and his wife, Lucille, with instructions to send it to King after they had read it. He added: "You will have realised by now that my political frame of reference is not 'non-cooperation,' but I examine every political activity, strategy, and tactic in terms of its success or failure."²¹ Elaborating on the meeting in a letter to his comrades in the United States, he summed up what all successful political events had in common: "the always unsuspected power of the mass movement."²² It was this mass movement that would end legal segregation in the 1960s, establishing a new field of political struggle on which we continue to try to find our way.

Program, strategy, and tactics. Our world is in dire need of a new insurgent universality. We are capable of producing it; we all are, by definition. What we lack is program, strategy, and tactics. If we set the consolations of identity aside, that discussion can begin.

Notes

Introduction

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- 3 Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 211.
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 - 7 Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 325.
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 - 9 Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 363.
 - 10 Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 371.
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 - 12 Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 383.
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 - 30 Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black*, 29.
 - 31 Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *Boundary 2*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 26.

6 Universality

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