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The Material Roots of Western Racism

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This article assesses the US discussion on the material roots of racism in which writers such as Malcolm X have been heavily criticised by ‘marxists’ for substituting race for class in the analysis of society.

The article argues that such criticism departs from the classical Marxist tradition in a manner characteristic of the dominant countries of the world in subordinating issues of political rights to the economic class struggle. This in turn arises from a failure to recognise the relation between racism and imperialism, itself arising from a division of the nations of the world which I define as ‘World Apartheid’.

The US-UK variant of marxism, which I characterise as ‘Imperialist Marxism’, has uncritically absorbed the world-view of the early imperialist pioneers – who were also social progressives – such as Rhodes and Chamberlain (and on the German side, Bismarck).

Empire financed social welfare and economic well-being using the value transferred to the heartlands from the colonies, which it justified with the concept of a ‘civilising mission’ to transplant a superior culture to the ‘backward’ conquered countries.

This system of domination persists economically today despite formal political freedom. The ‘civilising mission’ is reproduced in traditional Marxism through the notion that the working class of the dominant countries is culturally and politically superior to the working class of the remaining four-fifths of the world.

The characteristic core of this view is that political power is of secondary importance to economic equality. Racism can therefore be overcome by the simple dynamics of economic class struggle, and demands for political rights should be subordinated to higher wages and better welfare.

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Introduction

Since the beginnings of the eastern european transition towards a market economy and even before, western europe has seen a spectacular rise in racism in all its manifestations. This phenomenon, preceding the parallel rise in such countries as East Germany and Hungary and the general rise in ethnic and national conflict particularly in the Balkans and the former USSR, has been much discussed by western marxists, not always with useful results.

The subject has also been revisited by US Marxists following renewed evidence that discrimination and oppression of black people is on the rise again, and following a new (for the United States) development, namely growing virulent racism against immigrants. Middle eastern Americans and visitors to America have been a growing target, and with the formation of NAFTA, racism directed against Mexican and Central American immigrants is an increasing element of the agenda of the radical right and accepted by a majority of the American people.

In order to follow more recent discussions it is helpful to understand more about the general background of the US debate on racism. This article does not deal with the recent and often quite healthy discussion among US Marxists but with the earlier debate, at the end of the eighties, between (so-called) 'traditional' and 'neo-' Marxists. The neo-Marxist versus traditionalist debate was to a great extent a dialogue of the deaf, dividing the left between those who argued that sexism and racism cannot be analysed in the framework of classical Marxism, and those who counter that an emphasis on race and gender issues is in effect a diversion from the class struggle. The position argued here is that this false counterposition arises from considering only the internal class relations of the US, and a failure to grasp the connection between racism in the West and the world role of the Western powers.

The following article was written as a commentary on this debate and one book in particular, entitled 'The Political Economy of Racism' by Melvin Leiman, a serious but in my view misguided attempt to analyse racism according to two fundamental categories: on the one hand slavery in the US and on the other hand the economic segmentation of the US working class. The general acceptance of Leiman's views is attested by the success of his book, which received a literary prize and was widely read.

Traditional Marxism - what it is, and how to fight it

I scoured Leiman's fact-filled book for a long time for something good to say. When I found nothing I had to ask why, since Leiman is a sincere man who takes an important issue seriously.

This brought me back to the debate provoked by Robert Cherry's[1988] defence of 'traditional Marxism'. The first question I would like to address is: What tradition does this refer to?. The tradition of the second international, for example, is straightforward. It labels the wage struggle the 'class' struggle, makes it the primary

issue of politics and denounces all else as a diversion. It has alienated a lot of people with other problems, led a few million people to their death and, on the whole, not raised wages. More significantly, it is more often than not packaged as Marxism. This produces Cherry's tradition, and Leiman's book, which is scholarly, professional, and sadly not an aberration, being solidly planted in the Anglo-Saxon dialogue on racism. The question is why so many call it Marxism.

We have a double irony, not uncommon in the history of marxist thought; practices and theories which are in general completely unacceptable, and also have very little to do with what Marx was trying to say, are held up as its purest form, making poor Karl a very easy target. Meanwhile, those responsible for the distortion have moved on to higher things, and now join the attack on Marx by reviling their own former waste products in his name. In this case, however, the responsible tradition is not Stalinism but, I would argue, a creation of the western labour movement which, in earlier times, would have been more correctly termed social democracy. In its origin this is not simply an organisation or a group of parties, but a theoretical framework – primarily, a justification and apology for the dominant practice of the labour movements of the rich Western countries. These labour movements being in their general culture racist, sexist, economist and warlike, so is the ideological baggage they carry with them. The question which we have to explore is therefore this: what is the material origin of this general culture?

If one begins from the view, as most western Marxists seem to, that their own working class can do no wrong, then of course any attempt to understand racism as a working class phenomenon is ruled out from the outset and must be a revisionist deviation. But if one accepts – as it can reasonably be claimed, Marx did – that material conditions determine culture, then we can explain working class racism provided we understand that each working class exists, not in isolation from other nations but as part of a world system which has divided its nations into rich and poor, oppressors and oppressed, and which explains this division not as a product of the market economy but as a natural state of things. From such a standpoint, it is quite natural, though extremely reactionary, for the labour movements of the West to treat their Eastern and Southern sisters and brothers as inferior and even dangerous beings. This 'common sense' culture of the West is the common coin of Social Democracy.

Nevertheless in the US this has taken a peculiar turn, for here we have a country with no social democratic party which has managed to create a social democratic Marxism. This literary, cultural and organisational feat deserves closer study.

Cecil Rhodes and Joseph Chamberlain, the pioneers of modern British industrial imperialism, patiently explained that advanced countries have to buy off their working classes with the booty of colonial conquest. On this they were quite explicit. Both began life as the extreme left wing of British Liberalism, the most energetic social reformers and the most 'socialist' inclined. In a famous speech, Cecil Rhodes (who gave his name to Rhodesia) announced that having seen the poor downtrodden masses of London in all their misery and numbers, he had become convinced that only the conquest and exploitation of the rest of the world could provide for them. Admirably humanitarian for the British workers, but slightly less fortunate for African workers. The next step for the Liberal Imperialists was perfectly logical; they divided the Liberal Party on the issue of Home Rule for Ireland, forming the Liberal Unionists, then merged with the Conservatives to form the Conservative and Unionist Party, and

have now taken up refuge in the radical right of the Tory Party. Along the hundred-year way, however, they have left a considerable legacy of human misery and suffering, not to say ideological detritus.

America's situation, in many ways comparable with Britain's at the turn of the last century, is provoking a strikingly parallel development. Unable to compete with the rising new industrial powers, it has been forced to fall back on the substantial reserves of its almost total financial, commercial and military hegemony. If the parallel turns out to be exact, this is no comfort to today's generations; Britain's decline has so far taken over a century and is by no means at an end. In the course of this decline it has given the world two wars and Margaret Thatcher, whilst its rivals have provided us with fascism, genocide and nuclear weapons. The illusion that an alternative capitalist world leader can peacefully take the reigns now held by the US is not supported by history.

For Lenin, social democracy was the ideology of the dominant imperialism as it emerges from the digestive tract of the Western trade union movement. The 'civilising mission' comes out as the idea that Western workers are so advanced that everyone else must follow them.¹ The conquest of the globe comes out as the 'liberation of small nations' (poor little Belgium, poor little Kuwait). The mass slaughter of opponents comes out as the heroic battle against dictators bent on world domination (Castro, Galtieri, Qudaffi, Hussain, and now so help us Kim Il Sung).

The most ruthless imperialists start as social reformers, Clinton being the latest. The metropolitan workers' organisations put a specific stamp on this project. With a relatively low level of legal nonmilitary struggle they can build big trade unions and negotiate welfare concessions. In return they offer to seek nothing else. That is, they guarantee the security of the state and the domestic stability needed to pursue military policies overseas. The imperialist state is a dialectical unity of colonial militarism and domestic collaboration which determines these specific necessary class alliances, characteristic of contemporary world capitalism. When it breaks down, revolution breaks out: the Paris Commune 1870, Russia 1917, Germany 1918, Italy 1945, Portugal 1974.² The repercussions of Vietnam were a lesser form of this; even so it has taken twenty years to put the genie back in the bottle.

All struggles over *who exercises power* thus confront a coalition of the imperialist bourgeoisie and its working class parties.³ All battles for political equality, whether of women, black people or gay people; all national liberation struggles and all antimilitarist struggles meet universal bipartisan condemnation.

Traditional Marxism is a gaseous waste product of this joint production process. It is a vaporous cloud over the commonsense perception of the compromise with

¹This is very strong in countries which have won lots of wars, made no revolutions for at least two centuries and never been invaded or suffered fascism, perfect training for the instruction of the world's revolutionaries, which is why small Internationals are all headquartered in London or New York.

²Military defeat is so far the *only* circumstance that has produced revolutions in the advanced countries. This is a notable fact, and one of Marx's particularly brilliant insights was to understand and predict it, although it seems to have bypassed 'traditional marxism'.

³This was known even in Marx's day: "the English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat *alongside* the bourgeoisie. For a nation which exploits the whole world this is of course to a certain extent justifiable" Engels to Marx, October 7, 1858.

imperialism. Its special contribution consists of sophisticated leftist reasons why no-one should fight over power: for example civil rights promote a black middle class, equality is not a socialist demand, antimilitary struggles are pacifist, liberation struggles are nationalist, and above all none of these people understand class, by which is meant fighting for more money.⁴

Scientifically, the point of departure is the *fetishisation of national boundaries*, of which Leiman's work is a textbook illustration. He starts on page 1 with 'American capitalism', by which he means *capitalism in the United States of America*. Unfortunately US capital is not confined to the US. Among copious figures on living standards in the US the most salient is missing: the world provides an enforced annual subsidy never less than \$100 billion, and many times more in arbitrage, repatriated profits and unequal exchange. US capital will defend *this* aspect of its political economy by any means necessary. Leiman discusses this not as root cause but as a footnote, above all when forced to by the towering legacy of Malcolm X.

The great insight of black nationalism, which puts it head and shoulders above 'traditional Marxism', is to understand imperialism as the key to racism. Since this is also the key class relation of the advanced capitalist countries this is a huge theoretical advantage. The irony of sombre warnings against 'black nationalism' from US and English 'traditional marxists' is their starting point in the distributional struggle in one single country. Black nationalism starts from the international identity of interest of everyone oppressed by the most powerful capitalist classes in the world – the white ones.

One issue highlights the hypocrisy of these relations better than ten thousand income statistics: refugees. Without exception the rich countries have shut out the tide of misery which their own greed has provoked. The countries that can least afford it have taken them in. The contradiction which most succinctly characterises class relations in today's world is free trade in everything *except* labour power, with the main restriction on free movement *between* imperialist and dependent countries. Within the third world labour moves more or less without hindrance; likewise between the imperialist countries.⁵ Racism is World Apartheid.

This is so universal that it is internalised as 'natural'. Opposition to immigration from the third world is unanimous among the working classes of all advanced countries, even now the USA, itself an immigrant society. It is 'obvious' that if we let more people in there will not be enough houses, enough jobs, enough money, and so on. Actually it is not obvious and not true. When something untrue appears obvious this is itself a great scientific fact which must be studied. Real material relations reproduce themselves in thought independent of any conscious activity by the capitalists. The job

⁴Marx's view was this: "It is the most important object of the International Working Men's Association to hasten the social revolution in England. The *sole* means [my emphasis] of hastening it is to make Ireland independent...it is the special task of the Central Council in London to make the English workers realise that *for them the national emancipation of Ireland* is not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment but the *first condition of their own social emancipation*" (Marx to Meyer and Vogt, April 9 1870) So much for the awful perils of bourgeois nationalism.

⁵Leiman's book contains four references to immigration, none of them modern; his judgement (p51) is that 'Another *impediment* [my emphasis] to the development of interracial workers' solidarity was immigration: by constantly changing the composition of the working class, it very effectively prevented the establishment of a stable organizing base.' In point of fact every trade union movement worth speaking of has been built by immigrants. Everyone else knows who Joe Hill was. Leiman does not even understand where his own trade union movement came from.

of a scientist is to penetrate behind 'commonsense' to the reality it expresses, namely a near-complete breakdown of international working class solidarity.

Only blissful ignorance can lead to the complete blindness with which working class solidarity is treated. Leiman's lengthy discussion boils down to a single phrase: 'the fundamental community of interest between the black and white working classes'. Chapter 6 on Black-White Unity is a lament about the strange fact that it does not happen, aimed mainly at the black communities.

The issue he should have addressed is: how can solidarity be rebuilt between the poor of the world and a section of the working class which slams the door in their faces and then launches a pogrom against the few unfortunates who got in under the bar? One small privileged section of the working class scabs on the world-wide struggle against its own capitalists, is rewarded for scabbing, and projects these world social relations into its innards. Racism is the fetishised expression of the imperialist division of the world. The hierarchy in the metropolis more or less faithfully reproduces the hierarchy of oppression in the world, with the most recent arrivals from the poorest countries at the bottom and the oldest arrivals from the richest countries at the top.

Leiman tries to locate the roots of racism in slavery, a searing indictment of the American Dream which even traditional marxists cannot ignore. But if slavery is the *cause* of racism then in Europe it is an aberration and in Japan incomprehensible. Slavery is the most extreme expression of colonial servitude. It accounts for the specific form of racism in the US but not racism in general.

This produces a dialogue characteristic of traditional Marxism: whether as Shulman[1989] accurately puts it 'racism is something which the capitalists *do* to the working class'. Leiman shares the nonmaterialist view that racism is a capitalist conspiracy: their 'political interest in maintaining class hegemony requires dividing the working class'. Marx held that ideology is the reproduction in thought of *existing* material relations. Racism is present in the consciousness of the metropolitan working class because it is present in their relations to the rest of the world. This happens independently of the capitalists, just as commodity fetishism happens independent of propaganda.

Ignoring this, Leiman sets up a series of classic counterpositions. Racism, he explains, is endemic to capitalism. He needs this to deliver a chestnut: black reform struggles help the capitalists.

My basic theory in this study is that ending discrimination while maintaining capitalism is ultimately contradictory and that terminating both depends on achieving interracial working-class solidarity. Therefore all reformist activity (including the acquisition of political posts) that works within the existing political party system only acts to reinforce and legitimate the exploitative and racist capitalist mode of production and distribution.

The superficiality of this ninety-year old argument is revealed by the fact that the *one* permissible reform is the fight for higher wages. The trade unions, which most certainly 'work within the existing party political system' (in the US the bourgeois party system), which clearly 'reinforce and legitimate the exploitative and racist capitalist mode of production' and which never cease the 'reformist' pursuit of political posts, are ring-fenced against this criticism because the wage struggle is holy.

Such arguments are always used to reinforce the commonsense racism of workers who perceive any struggle for the rights they already have as a frivolous diversion from getting more money.

Political rights damage capitalism because it necessarily denies them to the great majority of humans. It is preposterous and insulting to dismiss the profound and heroic struggle of southern black people with the words (p323) 'they only changed the status of the blacks from one of *unequal exploitation* to one of *equal exploitation*.' If black people throughout the world had only the same rights and income as a poor American, capitalism would cease to exist. If it were not for the civil rights struggle today's American left would not exist to pass such patronizing judgements upon it.

Because this economic claptrap is nowhere to be found in Marx, traditional Marxism performs a service. It mutates Marx's categories so that racism can be dressed up as Marxism:

Marxists [which? who? where?] emphasize that economic factors are decisive in determining the general shape of any given societal formation and that the class struggle between the propertied and nonpropertied class is the key to an understanding of the 'laws of motion' of all class-divided struggle.

What Marx.[1977 p20] actually said is:

The guiding principle of my studies can be summarised as follows. In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life [my emphasis-AF] conditions the process of social, political and intellectual life.⁶

In the US and the UK the 'struggle between the propertied and nonpropertied classes' takes the form of an argument over the share of gross output, that is, a legal trade union wage struggle. For comparison, German capitalism in its time exterminated 40 million people, eliminated several races from various parts of the planet and devastated half of Russia.⁷ The 'economic' factors shaping this class struggle included Germany's late claim to a 'place in the sun', its defeat in the war, the Russian revolution and a historical tradition of anti-semitism in Eastern Europe predating capitalism by around 700 years.

If the 'struggle between the propertied and nonpropertied classes' covers all this then it just means 'everything to do with capitalism' and Marx's term is better. But its real content is clear from the rest of the book which centres single-mindedly on 'income, occupational structures, unemployment, education and housing', all from the point of view of *income*, of access to value distributed in the USA. The ellipsis substitutes the *economic struggle over the distribution of income* for the *political class struggle*. It

⁶Engels in his well-known letter to Block, September 21 1890, says '...According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining factor in history is the *production and reproduction of real life*[my emphasis-AF]. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase.'

⁷It also wiped out the unions, which set back the German wage struggle all of twelve years.

replaces the famous phrase in the Communist Manifesto "the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy" by the phrase, "the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise wages so high that the capitalists give up".

Leiman to his credit dislikes the grosser consequences of his own argument. He warns against 'economic determinism' and stresses the importance of 'consciousness' and of a 'balance' between 'class' and 'race' which is the sort of obeisance generally made in the presence of awkward little facts, like racism has existed since the Middle Ages and sexism since the dawn of prehistory,⁸ or ninety-nine percent of racists are workers.

The tragedy is that materialism, as distinct from economism, does explain far more about racism than individual consciousness. Traditional Marxism, which reduces material conditions to material income, opens the door to nonmaterialist accounts from people rightly incensed at what is portrayed as marxist, who then retreat into mystical, metaphysical or downright reactionary explanations.

The problem is not to counterpose 'material' to 'conscious' determinations but to identify the correct material conditions. Mountains will melt before racism can be understood in terms of the wage struggle. Racism, a political phenomenon, is a material means of maintaining world imperialist domination. It is the only way this domination can be maintained. The false appearance that capitalism governs by consent is a fetishisation of national boundaries, a product of artificial conditions sustained in the metropolis by the superexploitation of the rest of the world.

Capitalism remains the *world* dictatorship of the minority over the majority by the open and violent denial of political rights to the majority, starting with the right to live where you choose. This is world apartheid. Its ideological expression, racism, is the inhuman doctrine that the majority of the human race is not in fact human and therefore has no rights. This is an international culture of repression and any attempt to understand it within a single nation, above all the most powerful in the world, is doomed to failure. Leiman's well-meaning book illustrates this fact, albeit negatively, in laboratory-pure form.

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⁸Engels[1970] gives his own materialist account of the oppression of women in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, which dates the oppression of women to about 15,000 BC. Perhaps he was only a 'neo-marxist'.