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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

by ROB URIE  
06.07.2020

## Class, Race and Power

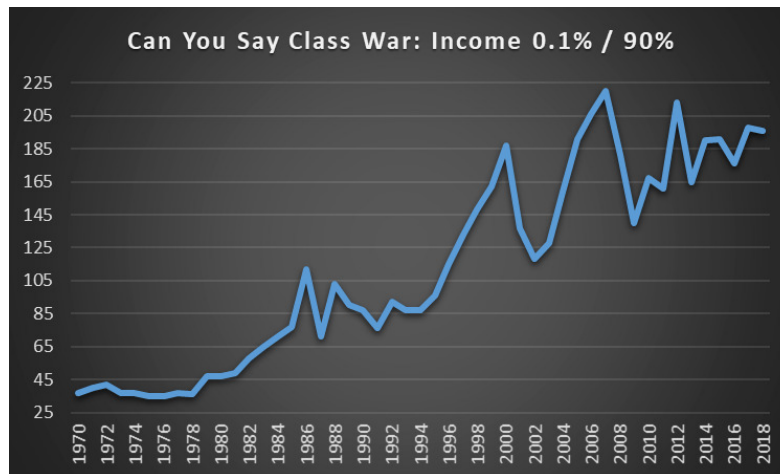


Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

*Since the onset of the Great Recession, a debate has persisted over creating what is described— depending on one’s premises, as either a trans-ideological working class movement or a red-brown alliance of socialists with fascists. ‘Socialist’ in this configuration is a classless movement that maps quite remarkably to the base of the Democratic Party. It is a mix of the right-thinking rich, the PMC and the slivers of working class and poor whose historical oppression threatens the rule of capital if not managed through social divisions and symbolic acts. Class here is a proxy for one’s social utility in a self-organized system of capitalist employment.*

That this ‘classless’ politics follows four decades of resurgent capitalism, with the result that political and economic power are more concentrated now than at any time since the 1920s, would seem to add descriptive content to economic class as an analytical tool of

the left. It (class) allows bourgeois whites to live in racially segregated neighborhoods, send their children to racially segregated schools, work in racially segregated employment, get racially segregated health care and shop in racially segregated stores while maintaining the moral clarity of opposing racism. Whatever the theoretical case for capitalism, 'we' aren't all in this together.



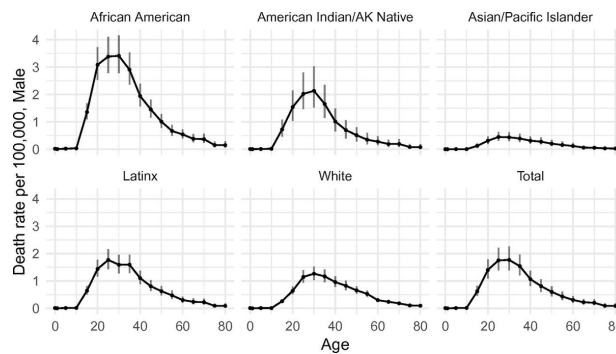
Graph: the defining characteristic of resurgent capitalism since the 1970s has been the increasing concentration of income (above) and wealth. While 'markets' are cited by capitalist economists to explain this trend, specific government policies, protections, guarantees and bailouts place markets at the end of this process, not the beginning. Persistently higher incomes create persistently higher wealth, the source of political power in money based politics. Source: Emmanuel Saez, inequality.org.

This racial segregation without racism illustrates the peculiar nature of liberal politics where beliefs are posed as political facts and politic facts are a matter of ideological convenience. Black, male, youth are disproportionately, but not uniquely, subjected to police violence (graph below). In the liberal frame, and as has been predominant in media reports of the motives of protesters, it is this disproportion that is being objected to. As the leadership of Black Lives Matter and the protests more generally have both stated and implied, it is the fact of police violence that is at issue. In contrast, within the liberal frame of 'privilege,' having the police kill more white men and a lot more women of both races is just as logical a solution to disproportionality as ending police violence.

Approximately 5% of the human beings killed by the police in recent years were female, meaning that 95% were male. This ratio of 19:1 is many multiples of the racial disparity in police killings. One way to interpret the presentation of this fact is as diminishing the meaning of racial disparity. Another is as adding depth to the nature of police violence.

Two recent papers ([here](#) and [here](#)) provide class analyses of mass incarceration to conclude that it is the poor who are on the receiving end of policing, arrest and incarceration. This relation of race to class does nothing to diminish the targeted horror of police violence.

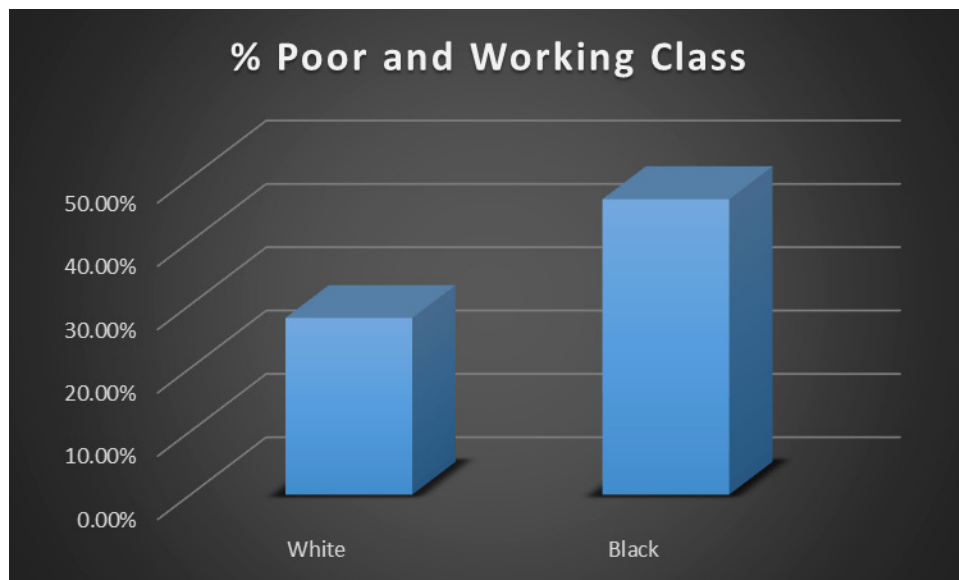
Visceral objections to broadening the scope of political concern (race to class) are honestly come by through the seeming intractability of problems like police violence in poor neighborhoods, and less honestly through the redirection of political energy into officially-sanctioned channels for political gain. The New Democrats jettisoned the soft class politics of worker interests in favor of capitalist (trickle-down) solutions to class antagonisms. But class antagonisms haven't gone away. Ultimately, shifting official focus to race redirects political energy, but it doesn't pay the rent. And contested history (e.g. confederate statues) is occurring in a racially segregated present.



*Graph: the racialized narrative of police violence targeting black, males is supported by well-sourced data. Complications include that men are targeted at a much higher multiple than women and the same is true of class— poor people are targeted by the police, not rich. None of this detracts from the righteous, and factually correct, claim that young, black, men are unjustly killed, arrested, and incarcerated. The liberal solution, ‘diversity,’ includes gender but excludes class. When applied to police violence, diversity as a political strategy leaves the rich untouched. Source: pnas.org.*

The fact that racial segregation is enforced and maintained through economic segregation complicates the theory that racists cause racist outcomes. Neoliberalism has sharpened the class differences that create and define modern racial segregation. Through support for neoliberalism, the wealthy liberals who most abhor racism in the abstract are most responsible for its social manifestations like segregated neighborhoods and schools. One can assume that racism is the causal mechanism, but that points the finger at economic factors that don't readily accommodate abstract motives.

This paradox flips the liberal script that racism defines the contours of racially differentiated outcomes. If racists provide the alleged motive, but anti-racists control the means, it is the means that are determinative. ‘Deplorables’ aren’t telling oligarchs, corporate executives, and the PMC what to do. They exist outside of official power. When it comes to policing, the ‘bottom-up’ view that racist cops set their own agenda is belied by the power and the legal immunity from prosecution they have been given. Localized policing and incarceration are given federal mandates through legislation like the 1994 Crime Bill.



*Graph: the poor and working class, defined here as having family incomes \$0 – \$49,999, have higher relative representation by blacks, but larger absolute representation by whites. Given that nearly half of blacks are poor or working class, but less than a third of whites are, efforts to portray working class politics as the purview of racist whites 1) aren’t descriptively accurate and 2) sow divisions that obscure unified class interests. To the extent that poor and working class whites are racist, their class position assures that they don’t have the power to set political agendas. Source: census.gov.*

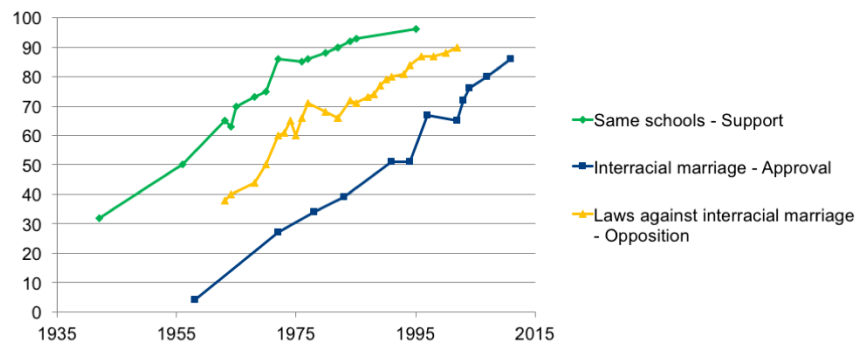
The visceral fear of racist terror that is reported to haunt American blacks has little bearing on the social mechanisms of economic exclusion that are endemic to capitalism. Measures like economic mobility assume that it is equally distributed from poor to rich. In contrast, the idea of social reproduction illustrates how economic mobility can exist within static class relations. As the graph above illustrates, blacks are ‘over-represented’ amongst the poor and working class relative to whites. Around 1970, economic mobility ended for the bottom half of the income distribution, with rising economic

mobility, as measured by rising real incomes, concentrated amongst the rich where only 5% of blacks exist.

This combination of factors meant that 1) the persistence of racial segregation since the onset of neoliberalism can be well explained by low economic mobility that left pre-existing racial segregation intact and 2) through class, poor and working class blacks share their economic circumstances with poor and working class whites, not with bourgeois liberals no matter what their racial sentiments might be. Whatever the intent, it was the sharpening of class divisions that hardened racial segregation in housing, education, and employment in recent decades.

Nothing written here reduces racism to anything less than its full social character. With the hardening of racial segregation through sharpened class distinctions, this full social character includes class relations that produce racially differentiated outcomes outside of racist intent. Socialists and anarchists battling working class racists and ‘fascists’ in the streets reinforces the neoliberal economic order quite straightforwardly. Doing so isn’t an attack on power, it is an attack for power. The causal mechanisms of neoliberal economic repression determine class. This is definitional. These are determined from above— by owners and bosses, not by workers.

Fig. 1 (W): Principles of Equality - Schools and Interracial Marriage  
(White respondents)



Same Schools: "Do you think white students and black students should go to the same schools or to separate schools?"  
Interracial marriage: "Do you approve or disapprove of marriage between blacks and whites?"  
Laws Against Interracial marriage: "Do you think there should be laws against marriages between blacks and whites?"

*Graph: From the 1940s on, white people have grown more tolerant of racial integration according to polling. After federally mandated programs of racial integration were tried*

*in the 1960s and early 1970s, they were gradually abandoned in favor of ‘equality of opportunity.’ White people’s opinions continued to evolve, but racial integration was left unfinished. Today, most white people decry racism while living in racially segregated neighborhoods and sending their kids to racially segregated schools. Source: University of Illinois.*

Consider, programs to end racial segregation in public schools like federally mandated school busing were most effectively countered by liberal politicians like Joe Biden at the behest of his bourgeois constituents. As with many such efforts, their arguments were economic and qualitative— they didn’t want to diminish the education of their children by busing them to the poorly funded schools to which poor and working class black and brown children were consigned. When asked (graph above), they support racial integration in the abstract. But when it comes to redistributing the political and economic power necessary to do so, they defer to the just distribution of capitalism. Lest this be less than evident, the flip side of meritocracy is that the poor ‘merit’ poverty.

By the early-mid 1990s, nearly 95% of whites polled (graph above) thought that public schools should be racially integrated— in the abstract. This triumph of liberalism resulted in the election of neoliberal politicians who told tales of diversity and inclusion that included race, gender, and the additional categories of modern identity politics. The rhetoric was redirected toward equality of opportunity, with the idea being that markets would produce a just distribution of economic outcomes. The conceptual problem with redistribution is that if the poor don’t deserve their lot— the premise behind social welfare programs, then neither do the rich. Merit either works or it doesn’t.

Over the last four decades of neoliberal ascendancy, ‘deplorables’ and ‘fascists’ had no control over the economic forces that sharpened American class divisions. To the extent they were / are working class, they were on the losing end of these sharpened divisions, as were poor and working class blacks. The people who determined this trajectory and its broad contours are oligarchs, corporate executives, the PMC, and neoliberal politicians. The irony of perceiving and describing people as poor losers, and then assigning to them the power to determine four decades of broad economic outcomes, seems to have been lost.

The reason why this fight is worth having is that until political and economic power is redistributed downward, there is little possibility of resolving existing social tensions. Individual cops may or may not be racists. However, if they weren’t doing the bidding of

the rich and powerful, they wouldn't have jobs. And they definitely wouldn't have immunity from prosecution for killing poor people. Forget about what rich people think for a minute. If, from the perspective of poor and working people, they don't see themselves as deserving of being poor, then the rich don't deserve to be rich. Again, this is definitional. It's what the 'system' in economic system means.

There is plenty of evidence (links above) that economic segregation— class, has maintained and sharpened the system of racial segregation of prior decades. Even if people could be talked out of racial animus, poor people can't afford a million dollar house and the rich and PMC won't choose to live in poor neighborhoods with few social amenities, poor infrastructure and schools, and the social dysfunction that poverty entails. There is no way to end so-called systemic racism without redistributing political and economic power from those who have it to those who don't. If you want to gauge the depth of 'classless' anti-racism, see how little economic and political power actually gets handed over. In this case, 'nothing' is just another word for a whole lot left to lose.

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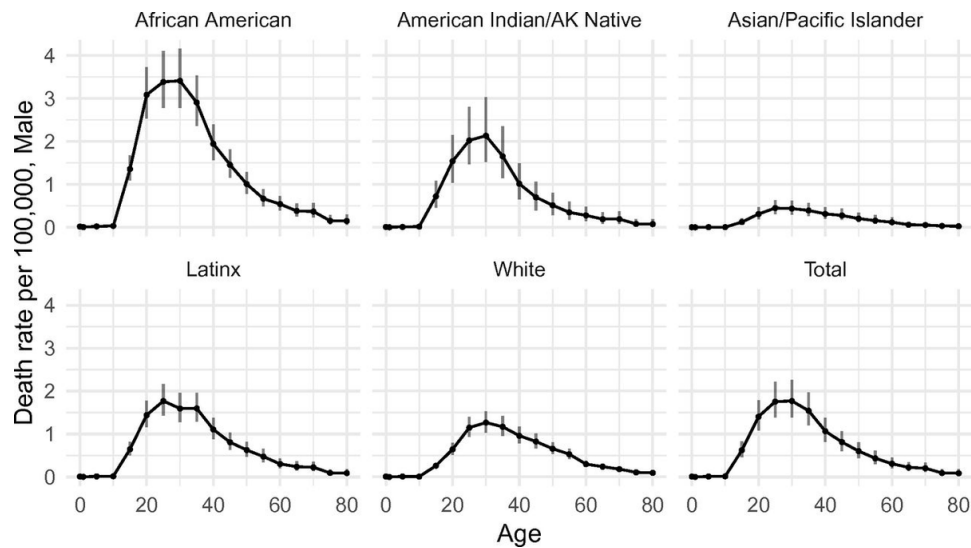
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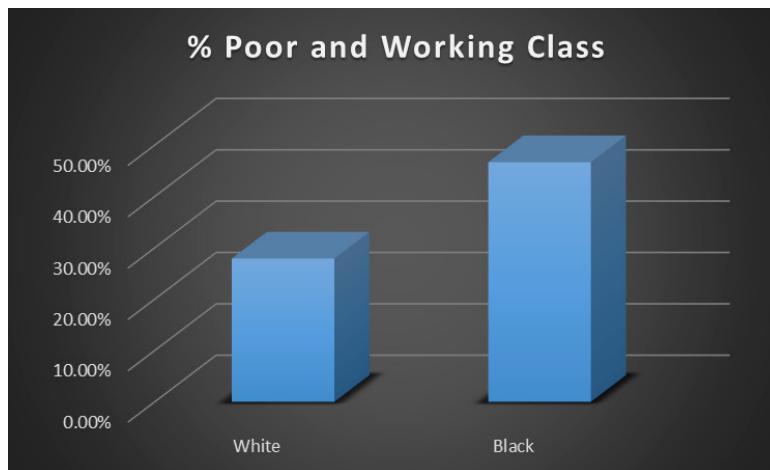




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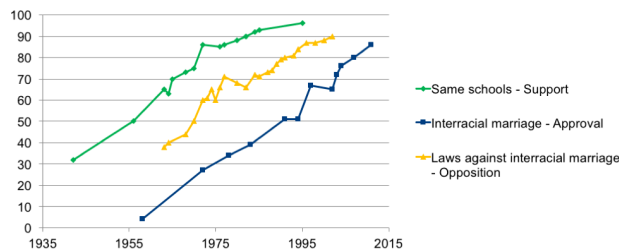
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**CounterPunch 03.07.2020**