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Systemic Racism and Progressive Reconstruction

President Trump christened the activist authority behind the recent protests in his 4th of July Mount Rushmore speech: “We are now in the process of defeating the radical left, the Marxists, the anarchists, the agitators, the looters, and people who in many instances have absolutely no clue what they are doing” (Annie Karni and Maggie Haberman, “Trump Updates ‘American Carnage’ Message for 2020,” New York Times, 7/7/20).

Marxists usually have a pretty good idea what they’re up to, so they don’t seem to fit with the rest of these allegedly clueless and destructive perps. The anarchist label captures the crude parlance of the word as being prone to violence and disruption. It appears to be Mr. Trump’s effort to secure a catchall category that indicts the series of alleged destructors who tested the legitimacy of the protests, and not the anarchists who broke from Marxism in the late 19th century over the issues of rational predictability and central authority. These latter anarchists had much more than a clue and they were not dedicated to violence.

This predictably suffuses cyberspace with fear-conjuring isms that leave an emotional chill on the tongues of aspiring thinkers. It distorts and misrepresents the actions of a wide swath of protesters who want change but are not privy to Marxism.

Ben Carson made the Marxist link a few days earlier in denouncing Black Lives Matter (BLM) on Fox News. He admitted that everybody “would agree” that black lives matter, but “we are talking about something else when we are talking about a movement that espouses things like taking down the model of Western family structure, talking about defunding the police, and the host of other things on their website, the Marxist influence

(Ann Wilson, “Ben Carson: Black Lives Matter’s Marxist Ideology ‘Antithetical to the American Model and to Patriotism in this Country’,” TheBL, 7/2/20). It’s not clear what “other things” he had in mind, or what the “Marxist influence” is.

This is curious since BLM’s website does not designate a critique of capital as one of its planks. Since the traditional family structure’s complicity in reproducing capitalism—through its patriarchal influence—is crucial for Marxism, its call for the dismantling of this structure is a sympathetic tangent, as is the stress on empowering women. But there’s no reference to the broader influence of the economy on the problems of race, only culturally vague urgings for more equality. But Carson’s response has the virtue of at least responding to something palpable, whereas Mr. Trump reprises his loose tongue.

Carson’s association of non-existent ideas with BLM appears to be an attempt to discredit it, not merely pose a disagreement. This suggests the administration is likely threatened by BLM’s growing popularity in the mainstream, seeing this as evidence of a strengthening Democratic Party. Certainly not as evidence of a strengthening left since Biden the centrist is the presumed leader. The rhetoric and aggressive momentum of the protests simulate a radical threat, but BLM’s possession and application of this energy suggests otherwise. Many would say it isn’t Marxist enough, and if it were then there wouldn’t be so much mainstream support.

Marxism and BLM are related through a concept that Marx developed in the early pages of Capital, Volume 1. This is commodification. The mystery of the goods-producing machine lies in the conversion of quality values, especially labor, into products valued greater than the sum of these inputs. This value is realized when the products circulate for sale as commodities that bear no visible traces of their making. They’re suppressed in the process. The resulting product’s value is greater only in a quantitative sense, however, since the process is geared to making things for consumption and exchange. These overly-valued things then become fetishes, inflated un-satisfiable possessions that stoke the desire for more of the same. They’re devoid of history and appropriable for purposes unrelated to the source of the inputs.

The killing of George Floyd and the magnitude of the subsequent protests sent the quality messages of BLM circulating for millions of new subjects to consume. The greater exchange and exposure to those outside the base of sympathizers, particularly whites, has led to enlightenment about the issues which invest BLM, but to an insecurity as well that has unleashed the compensatory need for many progressive white liberals to, well,

whitewash it. According to Ruth Fowler: “By purchasing the books we will never read..., the hoodie we will never wear, the meal from a restaurant we will soon forget, the selfie at a BLM march, white liberals are participating in the erasure of their own guilt and complicity. They are offering a comfortable alternative to the destruction of systemic racism, an alternative which posits that the system can still exist in the same form if we just be a bit kinder, a bit nicer, a bit more inclusive” (“Then as Farce: The Commodification of Black Lives Matter,” CounterPunch, 7/1/20).

Marketing meets the minds that matter in the expansion of the movement to eradicate racism. Whites, Fowler suggests, can’t embrace BLM in any other way since its subtext, if not the website’s content, is more radical than what they can absorb. They draw the line at peaceful, family-friendly protests and petitions and don’t strongly support the expunging of systemic racism. They’re complicit in the system’s conversion of content to slogans, the language that greases popularity. The proper packaging produces the safe versions that whites can purchase, fetishes that grant absolution for their guilt.

For many whites the circulating “BLM meaning” is a new event, or thing. That it’s devoid of the content many imagine might exist between the lines adequately identifies this supposedly radical organization, boosts its seductiveness.

A little mouse-clicking makes messages manifest for the inquisitive, the meanings they suspect BLM is harboring and which they are all too ready to disavow. The link “blacklivesmattersyllabus” reveals, for example, the Black Panthers’ “Ten Point Program,” as if to signal continuity with the post-MLK moment of activism from half a century ago. Fowler would likely agree that the name itself will surely stoke the fears of white liberals, though this “syllabus” is a quite whitened shortlist of demands for better housing, healthcare, education, jobs, policing, criminal justice, and above all the freedom to control communities.

When activist organizations are perceived to be too radical, institutions tend to perk up and offer their services. The Black Panthers had achieved such a presumption of authority in the late 1960s that the cream of New York’s white liberal society flocked to Elmer Bernstein’s lavish condo in mid-town Manhattan for a fundraiser, ostensibly to help bail out a few falsely accused members. Tom Wolfe’s “Radical Chic,” one of his more innovative pieces of literary journalism, recorded the texture of ambiguous voices at this event, mostly those of the whites—the real Panthers peripheral to the story. These voices never seriously broach the issues of race and racism. It’s mostly another social event for

celebs. One middle-aged woman exclaims excitedly to her brood that this was the first time she has seen a Panther! The question lingering throughout is why all these white folks are so interested in these radicals. Wolfe intimates that it has to do with more than being “chic.” They may not be very well versed on the issues, but they could soon be living in a more darkened society and it won’t hurt to get in on the action now. This interest is so strong that the Bernsteins hire light-skinned, replacement servants for the event to ward off any suggestion they’re racist.

Corporate America has stepped up in support of BLM. The big tech companies have pledged millions, with Apple offering \$100 million for a new Racial Equity and Justice Initiative. The Big Box stores also have deep pockets. Walmart is contributing \$100 million over five years to create a Center for Racial Equity. Thousands of other brands have offered lesser amounts to the cause, from gaming companies, to clothing and accessories companies and other retailers (Mercey Livingston, “Major Brands Donating to the Black Lives Matter Movement,” cnet, 6/26/2020).

One wonders what kind of imprint for racial justice these endowments will generate. The abysmal material conditions of the lower classes, especially blacks, are a significant factor in generating the recent protests, and many of these companies are responsible for maintaining them. Walmart, for example, a good candidate for the industry standard, refuses to pay a living wage or benefits, forcing many of its employees to get welfare. A significant degree of the inequality that besets this country could be corrected almost overnight if its corporations would increase wages to levels that lift families out of poverty. Will these endowments then be given to mostly blacks? Will they be given directly to those who need it, for real jobs, or to consultants who will “study the problem?” Will the hires be the already-educated or the yet-to-be credentialed masses? If the former, will they be indigenous or imported from other countries? Will these gifts lead to the givers designing programs and their outcomes consistent with the neoliberal formula, with hierarchy and class barriers preserved, or will they seize the chance to innovate and satisfy the pressures to produce significant improvement in equality—take the spirit of the protest messages to heart—and absorb the masses left behind?

It’s most likely that these corporations, successful at branding, will re-brand and appropriate the energy around the protests given the limited nature of the BLM agenda to date and the weakened liberalism of the Democrats who mostly own this organization. The corporations are not interested in pushing this alliance to the left, moves that could

eventually threaten profits, but in performing sufficiently to satisfy the emerging consensus on solving anti-racism and inequality without significantly upsetting the status quo. This means getting in on the action early to make sure liberal sentiments don't easily slope toward something more radical.

This attitude is hardly new. According to Naomi Klein, companies have historically stalked the inner-city streets for creative currents to exploit in their sales promotions, turning alternative ideas and lifestyles into mere product (No Logo).

Moving forward, BLM needs to develop an agenda that resists commodification, one that white liberals can't convert to comfortable slogans; and one that corporations can't sanitize and appropriate. This means distancing itself from the Democratic Party. While the Democrats have come out firmly in support of significant chunks of aid for victims of the Covid crisis, for example, and despite blockages from the Republicans, their initiatives are clearly about stabilizing existing institutions and not restructuring them. The Party is still in thrall to the neoliberal order, governed by filter-down, monetarist strategies to prop up the existing class hierarchy. This constraint is reflected in BLM's positions to date (Andrew Stewart, "Can We Compare the George Floyd Protests to the Vietnam War Protests?" CounterPunch, 7/7/20).

This deepening crisis has yet to appreciably expand the Party's left wing, though if the current negotiations in Congress for the new stimulus plan fail to sustain the existing level of financial support for the burgeoning victims of our dysfunctional system, this might change. Will these same forces encourage BLM to broaden its focus, construct a critique of capital that will give Ben Carson something to really worry about?

What a sight it would be if BLM could gather the smoldering remains of the recent protests, merge them into a MLK-type coalition, energized with a working agenda about how to combat systemic racism, and converge on Washington ready to put pressure on the Congressional negotiators to do the right thing!

They could pressure Congress with their numbers to pass an even stronger version of what the Democrats sketched together before the last break, the three trillion dollar aid package—The Heroes Act—that the Senate has ignored, one more aligned with what the progressive wing has advocated. This provides the funding to states that will allow them to survive the effects of the continuing lockdowns and avoid layoffs that will spiral the economy down further and mandate an endless cycle of budget cuts for education and other human services. Of the package's provisions that target the specific and immediate

needs of victims, the most popular and productive is the \$600 unemployment supplement—soon to expire—that's keeping many victims of the crisis relatively solvent and holding back the pending bankruptcies and foreclosures. The Democrats should be pressured to expand this key provision and extend it through the end of the crisis with the purpose of permanently increasing benefit levels to compensate for the perennially repressed wage levels, allowing workers to briefly experience the effect of something like a living wage, even collect for unpaid debts. In fact, this push could garner further support for universal basic income, an idea that's catching on as quality jobs are increasingly being displaced through technology.

The Republican arguments against even extending this program at all, that it represses the work ethic by dispensing benefits higher than what workers received in wages, discouraging them from returning to work, refuse to face the numbers showing how the vast majority of these jobs are gone. But why do wages and supplements have to be mutually exclusive? This is the formula that northern European countries, especially Germany, have followed to stabilize their Covid economies, preventing the endless austerity cycles.

The stale arguments about affordability that fuel the current revival of austerity-rant should be challenged more vigorously than the Democrats have to date. Justifying the liberal idea of deficit spending in a moment of national crisis for humane reasons is not the same as asking the upper tier—who've benefited so greatly from the tax cuts over the past two generations—to pay a fairer share. This morally resonates not only because the downturn has disproportionately damaged those without capital and resources, but elite corporations have been fattening up during the crisis, helped along by the quite liberal transfers from the stimulus plans. And the Democratic leadership has not pushed strongly enough to contact-trace who received these funds and what they did with them, actions which could produce enough resources to pay for needed programs without reversing tax cuts or adding wealth taxes.

Since scarcity and material lack fuels racism, such an equitable restoration to at least the status quo would stabilize the system in the short term and seed the potential for a progressive reconstruction in the long term, one that will work to resist commodification, and above all provide the foundation for eliminating systemic racism.

The phrase “systemic racism” has become a very potent slogan, uttered endlessly and pasted on surfaces everywhere to name the enemy. It’s mostly taken to mean that racism is ubiquitous, everywhere in the system, which is certainly credible. But it’s not an abstract enlargement of the skin-color-intentional variety. It refers to the reversals people of color, and the lower classes, experience from the normal workings of the system. The system-wide laws and their applications may resonate with universalism, but in practice those without the means—already victims of embedded unfairness—can’t access the system’s institutions on an equal basis with others.

Low mortgage rates can only be accessed with collateral and good credit scores, both of which tend to be disproportionately lacking for these victims, especially blacks. They can theoretically buy anywhere but residents pressure lenders to exclude people of color in the belief that their presence will reduce property values. Public school budgets are mostly paid for with property taxes, and since these are disproportionately lower in non-white neighborhoods the salaries paid to teachers and the resources provided tend to be subnormal. Standardized tests, the precondition for entry to higher education, are theoretically constructed with knowledges that all can access, but inadvertently exclude blacks and other minorities as a result of cultural biases. The institutional access to abortion rights nominally supports everyone but in practice leads to the decline of births for blacks. Healthcare is legally available to everyone at a price but embedded deficits pertaining to income effectively preclude access for blacks and other low-income populations, leaving pre-existing conditions that make them more vulnerable to Covid-19. These are just a few examples.

The important point is that Congress is now constructing a stimulus package which is nominally for everyone, but the austerity-driven devilish details will certainly have a checkered impact. Given the likely reduction in the unemployment supplement and grants to states, the scarce residuals will be doled out with the promise of equal fairness, but those with embedded deprivations, especially blacks, will bear the brunt of unfairness in access to education, healthcare, jobs, business grants, etc. BLM should broaden its agenda, develop a critique of material relations, take positions beyond what the Democratic Party represents, ally with the forces that can deliver a progressive reconstruction. A surplus of bodies on the line now to pressure Congress might save many black lives.

It might even consider weighing in on immigration. The Democrats are for open borders, a position consistent with the country's founding, but in times of shrinkage like the present it could be adjusted. While the system is capable—if reconstructed—of adequately providing for the indigenous and immigrants, the friction over jobs between blacks and new arrivals, especially Hispanics in the southern California region, for example, is all too real. Should the indigenous get first crack? Given Mr. Trump's besmirching of nationalism, this perspective reeks of suspicion. But progressives need to reclaim a humane nationalism that meshes with a more realistic globalism so endeared by the Democrats. A little contact-tracing here can show if immigration in specific instances meets market needs or distorts them. The corporate recruitment of professionals from other countries, however necessary and productive this has proven to be, could also be adjusted in this moment when positions that can spur upward mobility for blacks are sorely needed.

Finally, a significant adjunct of the Democrats' globalism is the welcome admission of foreign students to colleges and universities, flagged recently when Mr. Trump attempted to arbitrarily restrict them. These numbers are quite high, pumped up during the last economic crisis in 2008 when schools actively recruited foreign students—who pay more tuition—to help survive the austerity budgeting. Given the drastic drop in black enrollment in the post-Affirmative Action era, the freeing up of some of this space could help kickstart a progressive reconstruction and forge a plank in a potential reparations policy.

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