

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مېباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مېباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY ADRIAN KUZMINSKI

06.09.2021

Racial Socialism



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

We take racism for granted as a seemingly intractable reality. This is more the case than ever with the rise of critical race theory (CRT). Whereas racism was previously understood to be an attribute of individuals—based on certain beliefs they held—in CRT racism works the other way around: it is said to arise out of the intersection of various social practices, which in turn structures individual behaviors to the benefit of some and the harm of others.

In this flip-flop of race theory, responsibility has shifted from the individual to society, and solutions have shifted from human morality and conscious intention (rooted in

personal guilt and punishment), to mass social engineering (designed to reconfigure intersections to redistribute equal outcomes, all in the name of social justice). What you think doesn't matter. It's who you are socially that counts.

To reconfigure intersections is to rewrite the rules by which most institutions and common social practices function. The cause celebre for early CRT thinkers on reconfiguring intersections was a 1974 supreme court case, *Miliken vs. Bradley*. The court's earlier landmark 1954 decision in *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka, KS*, outlawed outright segregation in public schools, but failed to address other factors apart from legally instituted segregation which might result in *de facto* segregation.

The issue came to a head in the *Miliken* case. The NAACP argued that Detroit public schools remained highly segregated in spite of the *Brown* ruling. White flight from the city to neighboring suburban municipalities, leaving blacks behind, was said to be reinforced by redlining and other indirectly exclusionary policies. The plaintiffs asked for relief by the state of Michigan (under Governor *Miliken*) by imposing desegregation across urban and suburban school district lines.

The Supreme Court in a 5-4 ruling denied the requested relief by maintaining that the school district lines in question were not drawn with segregation in mind. For critical race theorists, the *Miliken* case showed how intersectionality (interrelationships among established social practices and institutions, in this case having to do with municipal jurisdictions, property rights, financial practices, etc.) worked to perpetuate unequal outcomes. The court's failure to deal with these underlying causes of racism became, to critical race theorists, a classic example of racial injustice re-enforced by the failure to recognize the role of intersectionality

The idea that social relations are the principal constructs of individual values and behaviors stems from post-modernist theories developed in academia in the late twentieth century. But the guiding idea—that individuals are the functions of social forces—goes back to Marxism, with its emphasis on the defining role of material forces in developing society and culture. Individuals might think they are acting freely and consciously in pursuing their own ends, but in fact they are doing little more than expressing impulses largely if not wholly predetermined by their economic circumstances.

These Marxist ideas have been variously modified by thinkers as diverse as Georg Lukacs, the Frankfurt School, and more recently by structuralists, post-modernists, and trans-humanists. Michel Foucault has been perhaps the most influential exponent of what might be called neo-Marxist critical theory, within which CRT takes its place. Foucault

eliminated human intentionality from his social critiques, and proposed to reduce human experience to power relationships embedded, usually unconsciously, in institutions and social practices.

The struggle by more recent versions of critical theory has been not only to identify the defining intersections of society which promote unequal outcomes and social injustice, but to isolate which among them might open a road to social justice. The Marxist presumption has been that only that class or group can act to realize social justice which finds itself the victim rather than the beneficiary of the prevailing intersections of the day. It's not that the group which can act to achieve social justice will do so out of individualistic free choice, but rather that its very oppression will force it to resist and overturn the structures of social domination.

From Marx's day through most of the twentieth century that group was identified with the proletariat. The triumphs of fascism and the post-war rehabilitation of capitalism in the West largely co-opted the working classes, however, which ended up accommodating themselves to the prevailing intersections of capitalism rather than opposing them. Neo-Marxists, beginning with the Frankfurt School, cast about for who would better fill the revolutionary role, but with little success. Critical theory—after a last gasp in the political arena in the form of the New Left of the 1960s—turned inward and found refuge in the universities.

The problem of locating which social group might be capable of mounting a revolutionary challenge to the prevailing intersections of the day continued to elude critical theorists. Deconstructionists and other post-modernists had effectively sabotaged remaining traditional notions of objective truth in favor of the primacy of power relationships among groups, but as long as the only recipients of critical theory were primarily students from more or less privileged backgrounds, there was little prospect of political traction beyond the academy. The radical professoriate had little to say to the broader society, and higher education became increasingly irrelevant to the life of the nation. The effect on most students was to leave them paralyzed, caught between privilege and guilt. Some, however, picked up the challenge.

With the influx into higher education of Blacks, along with other minorities, through affirmative action and other means, everything changed. The introduction of a large cohort of students from non-privileged backgrounds was a game changer. Critical race theory was born out of its own intersection: one between a new generation of Blacks still living the searing histories of segregation, Jim Crow, and slavery, and neo-Marxist critical theory in

search of a new vanguard class by which to challenge the establishment. As a result of this intersection, that class could now be defined in racist rather than economic terms. All this came to a head with the murder of George Floyd. His death became the symbol of undeniable institutionalized structural racism maintained for the benefit of Whites at the expense of Blacks and other minorities. It was structural racism which crushed its victim by the neck. Thus was born a new dialectic of neo-Marxist political struggle led by a new generation of activists.

CRT assigned Blacks the role, once identified with the proletariat, of leading a social revolution. A new strategy was required to fulfill that role, and it was perhaps best articulated by Ibram X. Kendi in *How to Be an Antiracist*. He starts off by attacking racial neutrality, encapsulated in phrases such as ‘I am not a racist’ and ‘color blindness.’ “. . . there is no neutrality in the racism struggle,” Kendi writes: “The opposite of ‘racism’ isn’t ‘not racist.’ It is ‘antiracist.’ What’s the difference? One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist, or racial equality as an antiracist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and politics, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of ‘not racist.’ The claim of ‘non-racist’ neutrality is a mask for racism.”

Kendi turns racism from a vehicle of social injustice into one of social justice: “A racist policy,” he tells us, “is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. An anti-racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups.” Equity is not an assurance of equality of opportunity among racial groups, although it includes that; it is rather a guarantee, given equality of opportunity, of an equity of outcomes among racial groups. Kendi makes it clear that he regards all races as equal. It is for that very reason, in fact, that all human activity must be filtered through the criteria of racial equality. Only racial equality, he claims, can compensate for racial inequality.

Racial equality means equal access by all races to all social goods. How could this work? Home and property ownership, education, employment, institutional and political leadership, corporate investments, income and benefits, health care—these, and any other social outcomes one can imagine—would have to be distributed, it would seem, by some system of racial quotas. According to the 2020 US census, the White population is almost 58%, the Hispanic population is almost 19%, the Black population is just over 12%, and the Asian population is at 6%. So would Blacks, on a national basis, be entitled to 12% of

student enrollments, say, or 12% of home ownership, or 12% of the seats on corporate boards, or 12% of small businesses, and so on?

That might be described as Racial Socialism, a redistribution of property by race, in contrast to the earlier Marxist socialist attempt to redistribute property by class, that is, to the proletariat. The move from theory to practice, however, proved to be a dangerous transition for Marxism. It is only prudent to recall that, in spite of its social justice idealism, Marxist practice has had a dark side, from Stalinist purges, show trials, and the GULAG, to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, to Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, and beyond. Those radical and often horrific measures were invariably justified in the name of social justice. A serious policy of Racial Socialism would likely generate as much political opposition as did earlier versions of Marxist socialism, and might well require equally drastic measures to be realized.

Let's not misunderstand: There is no doubt about the economic exploitation of labor by capital (then and now); nor is there any doubt about the racial exploitation of people of color by structural racism; nor is there any doubt that serious structural changes are necessary to remedy these evils. The question is, is Racial Socialism part of the solution, or part of the problem?

Racial Socialism, like earlier critical theory, seeks a solution to social injustice by constructing an abstract concept ('class,' 'race') on the basis of accidental qualities and making it into a criterion of social justice. Here's the nub of the issue: race, like class before it, is an intellectual construct. Race and class are things we imagine about people; they are identities we impute to them: 'she's a person of color,' 'he's a proletarian'. These observations may well be true, but at most they are only external and indeterminate attributes of individuals. People cannot be reduced to them. They are not personal identities.

To take attributes as identities is to impose a pseudo-objectivity on people—an oversimplification, a fiction—by which they may live or die. At their most absurd—say in Pol Pot's world, where wearing glasses was enough to be classified as bourgeois and shot dead on the spot—they can turn into a hideous nightmare. The neo-Marxism of CRT has yet to be put to the test, as was earlier Marxism. It has only recently left the academy and found its political footing. But, as in the case of the proletariat, one is treated, or judged, in critical race theory not as a human being, but as a member of a group marked out by sharing an arbitrary quality.

Racial Socialism presumes that race is the root intersection giving rise to oppression. But even Kendi waffles on this key point. Towards the end of his book, he writes: “The history of racist ideas is the history of powerful policy-makers erecting racist policies out of self-interest, then producing racist ideas to defend and rationalize the inequitable effects of their policies, while everyday people consume those racist ideas, which in turn sparks ignorance and hate.” If racism is a fiction produced in the service of a preceding self-interest, then that self-interest is the real culprit. And if it can produce one fiction to justify itself, it can surely produce others. Indeed, there seems to be no end to the fictions self-interest can generate.

The problem is that there is no proving or disproving that concepts like class and race which have been empowered to define peoples’ identities are the functional causes of oppression. We can see oppression: the George Floyd video. We see a White man killing a Black man. We know it’s not an isolated case. We know it’s wrong. We know it spontaneously, not theoretically. We know something should be done. What CRT does is offer an interpretation of what we see. It goes beyond what we see and invites us to imagine that what we witness arises solely out of intersections of race which determine our identities.

Race and class are non-evident beliefs projected onto the individuals who display what are presumed to be the marks of those beliefs. Our belief in the determining power of ideas like class and race (among many others) is an illusion, a fiction we think is real; and insofar as we rely on such beliefs to guide our actions we impose them on ourselves and others. The most superficial evidence by which we presume our fictional beliefs to be verified—wearing glasses, skin color, etc.—can be sustained only by our insistence on the truth of the interpretations we read into them. But since any interpretation is only an interpretation, open to the competition of other interpretations, the struggle only continues. The Buddha, when asked to speculate about the mysteries of the world—Does the universe have a beginning or an end? Is there life after death?—famously refused to give an answer. If he were asked about social justice, we might expect the same response. We think we know what it is, but perhaps we don’t. That’s not to deny that pain and suffering, and right and wrong, don’t exist. Buddhism equally famously puts them front and center. The point is that our beliefs are part of our problem. Our pains and suffering are bad enough; our beliefs about them unfortunately can make them far worse.

Adrian Kuzminski is a scholar, writer and citizen activist who has written a wide variety of books on economics, politics, and democracy. CounterPunch 03.09.2021