

Vol. 1 Number 2 —Summer, 2019

# MAC **A r r o w**

Unitarian Universalist  
Multiracial Unity Action Council  
(UUMUAC)

“For the Unity of the  
light and dark skinned  
people of the world.”

Mailing Address: UUMUAC

P.O. Box 15358, Chicago, IL 60615-5142

Editor’s email: [uusj@sbcglobal.net](mailto:uusj@sbcglobal.net)

### **The Mission Statement**

It is the mission of the Unitarian Universalist Multiracial Unity Action Caucus to carry out and foster anti-racist and multiracial unity activities both within and outside the Unitarian Universalist Association through education, bearing witness and other actions, and expansion of our membership both within and outside the walls of our congregations.

### **The Vision Statement**

We envision our congregations, denomination, and society as not being color blind but color appreciative; as judging and treating members of the world’s rank and file by the content of their character, not the color of their skin or their cultural heritage; and as treasuring diversity in the context of the “Beloved Community.” We call this vision Multiracial Unitarian Universalism.

**To unsubscribe please send a note to [uusj@sbcglobal.net](mailto:uusj@sbcglobal.net).**

## Letter to the UUA Board and Leadership

Please read the accompanying article by progressive Paul Street, who shows us how to do politics in Trump territory ([www.truthdig.com/articles/how-the-left-can-gain-footing-in-white-america/](http://www.truthdig.com/articles/how-the-left-can-gain-footing-in-white-america/)). He really lays out the deep hole that the left-leaning identity politics of the liberal UU establishment has dug for itself. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 was a blazing advertisement for the catastrophic failure of this identity politics. Yet what has been the dominant UUA response? – To avoid serious discussion (perhaps because it hits too close to home?) and to simply bear down harder. The prime example: How the UUA has tied itself into knots over the phrase “white supremacy”.

So let’s take a deeper look at “white supremacy”: what the numbers actually say, to illuminate the election of Donald Trump. First off, still 70% of US citizens are of predominantly European descent. So it would be quite exceptional historically if this group did not have a dominant role in the US power structure. What has changed dramatically is that economic class is now, quite literally, trumping, the old racial categories.

Consider this statistic: “In 1960, 55% of the top-paying managerial and professional jobs in the U.S. economy were filled by white men without college degrees. Fast forward to 2014, and that group held only 14% of top-paying jobs” ([www.thirdway.org/report/white-working-class-men-in-a-changing-american-workforce](http://www.thirdway.org/report/white-working-class-men-in-a-changing-american-workforce)). Another shocking number is that the pay of “laborers and low-skill sales and service workers”, a more diverse but still predominantly white group, declined by 11% from 1960 to 2014.

And I found it mindboggling to see what has happened to the health of the poorest (those who did not finish high school), white versus black. The life expectancy of white men dropped while that of black men rose: year 1990 (70.5 vs. 62.0), year 2000 (69.1 vs. 65.1), year 2008 (67.5 vs. 66.2). And poor white women have been hit by a sledge hammer: 1990 (78.5 vs. 72.7), 2000 (75.6 vs. 72.7), 2008 (73.5 vs. 73.6). That’s right, a 5 year drop in life expectancy over 18 years, now below black women, into third world territory ([www.agingsocietynetwork.org/differences-in-life-expectancy](http://www.agingsocietynetwork.org/differences-in-life-expectancy)). At a time when US GDP has soared, this disparity has propelled a powerful surge of despair, anger, and resentment from the bottom. They’ll say, correctly, “My parents had a lot more opportunity than me. This white supremacy stuff is B.S.”.

The basic story is well known, but not understood or thought through carefully. Namely, there has been a huge shift in the economy over the last 40 years, a vast shift of wealth and income from the middle and working class and poor to the upper middle class and the rich. This corresponds to the “de-industrialization” of American, the decline of unions and benefits, the rise of the “gig economy”, temp work, outsourcing, financialization, mega-corporation monopolies, etc. And who had most of those good jobs prior to 1980? - White Americans, of course, especially white men! So who were the big losers? – The Same. That’s right, the elephant in the room is the **enormous loss of white supremacy**, or white privilege, or whatever you want to call it, over the last 40 years.

Yes, the top 20% is still doing very well, and is predominantly white, but that’s due to their class status, not their ethnic or racial background. They have even strongly recruited minorities to join their ranks, both domestically (like Obama) and internationally (like the new Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, from India). There has also been heavy recruitment at the lower end, such as Mexican farm workers. It’s all about thing like talent and cheap labor. Middle class whites are still modestly ahead of comparable minorities, but the gap has closed dramatically, mostly by big white losses and small minority gains.

Minorities like Hispanics and African Americans have always been at a disadvantage, so they did not have as much to lose. In fact they have actually advanced slightly over the last 40 years in absolute terms, and women have made substantial gains, leaving working and middle class white men to take the big hit from globalization, automation, union-busting, etc. Significant numbers of these white men are absolutely poorer than they were 40 years ago, with vast numbers relatively poorer, resulting in

a severe decline in social and economic mobility. Is it any wonder that so many white voters fell for Trump's rosy promises and egregious scapegoating? **What we've seen is not resurgence of actual white supremacy, but of the rhetoric of white supremacy, based on the genuine loss of real white supremacy in the bottom 80% of the US population.**

Thus Paul Street's step #9 is "Don't exaggerate the white privilege payoff in capitalist America", and his step #10 is "Appeal less (or not at all) to guilt over white privilege and more (or entirely) to white working-class people's self interest in interracial solidarity with black, Latino, Asian, and Native American working-class people..." Contrast this with the implicit, but false, UU / liberal narrative that whites don't need our help because they have white privilege after all. **The truth is we UUs need a new "Welcoming" program aimed directly at the bottom half of the US population, not only welcoming all, but seeking to energize a powerful wave of UU support for the 12 steps described by Paul Street.** I predict that this would make us far more welcoming to many minorities as well.

We need to challenge our upper middle class UUs – the top 20% nationally – to become powerful allies of our struggling brethren - black, white, whatever - and to themselves stand back from the rat race of affluence. And I don't mean only personal help, but a powerful political movement – local, regional, national, even global. Especially, to build the foundations for a big surge forwards when the next crisis hits. Historically, equality has been restored by only war or other cataclysms, as described in Walter Scheidel's new book "The Great Leveler – Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century". Today, a big financial crisis or recession may present a less lethal opportunity. If not, we should be prepared for the worst. History may not have much respect for "American exceptionalism".

My final word is from popular writer, guru, and historian John Michael Greer ([www.ecosophia.net/a-tune-for-mountain-dulcimer/](http://www.ecosophia.net/a-tune-for-mountain-dulcimer/)): "It's when a movement for social change makes common ground with the unorganized masses of the heartland that real change becomes a possibility."

--- Dick Burkhardt, Ph.D., life-long UU and activist for justice

[dick@democworks.org](mailto:dick@democworks.org), 206-721-5672  
4802 S Othello St, Seattle, WA 98118

## **How the Left Can Gain Footing in White America**

By Paul Street

Paul Street holds a doctorate in U.S. history from Binghamton University. He is former vice president for research and planning of the Chicago Urban League. Street is also the author of numerous books

Near the end of his life, the great civil rights and anti-war leader and democratic socialist Martin Luther King Jr. wrote that the "real issue to be faced" in the United States was "the radical reconstruction of society itself." These words have never been truer than they are today, when the profits system threatens to end livable ecology in the historical near term.

It will be difficult, if not impossible, to carry out King's reconstruction without backing from millions of white people in what is still very much the world's most powerful state. While the U.S. population becomes less Caucasian with each decennial census, the nation is still supermajority—69 percent—non-Hispanic white. The nation's physical and related political geography is whiter still, thanks to a political system that over-represents America's disproportionately white rural and exurban regions and states.

How might a U.S. left that mattered—currently nonexistent, thanks in part to its hyper identity-politicized alienation from everyday white people (not a new problem)—find a place in white America? How could it do that without dropping its principled and undebatable opposition to racism, ethnocentrism and nativism?

I am an anti-racist, leftist historian and journalist who grew up in an unusually integrated and liberal big-city neighborhood and has spent many years living in predominantly white and rural counties. Thanks to a retrospectively welcome failure to achieve lasting professional class success, I have spent a good share of time employed alongside (and talking politics with) "white working-class" people in the "heartland."

Here, for what it's worth, are 12 recommendations for how my fellow leftist progressives might understand and communicate with "flyover zone" whites in ways that further our goals without sacrificing our commitment to racial, ethnic and gender equality and environmental sanity and without pushing middle-American and noncollege-educated white folks further to the right:

1. Drop the notion that you/we don't need a lot of white allies to advance leftist goals. King knew better than that. So did the Black Panthers, who worked to help working-class whites, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans build organizations that would merge their specific ethnocultural identities with a "proletarian" people's struggle against capitalism and imperialism. King placed a big emphasis in his last years on fighting with and for poor and working-class people of all colors against the economic injustices of capitalism. (He had no romantic illusions about people of color and a few white allies being able to transform America alone. He would have been horrified by the position of the blustering white "radical," violence-fetishizing and infantile-leftist Weathermen, who decided in 1969 to write off pretty much the entire white U.S. population as reactionaries. The Panthers rightly rejected the "anti-white chauvinist" Weatherman standpoint as idiotic.)

2. Avoid blanket statements about "white people" and "white America." People on the left rightly bristle at broad racist and sexist generalizations about blacks, Latinos, Asians, Muslims, Arabs, females, immigrants, gays, lesbians and transgendered people. We should also avoid sweeping statements about all U.S. whites, who are torn by their own sharp socioeconomic, ethnic, partisan, political and ideological differences.

3. Avoid saying insulting and condescending things about nonmetropolitan and working-class whites—stuff like presidential candidate Barack Obama riffing on how rural whites "get bitter, cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them" and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton telling rich New York City campaign donors that Donald Trump's white, rural and noncollege-educated backers were "a basket" of racist, nativist, homophobic and sexist "deplorables." Clinton's sneering comment was vote-getting gold for the white nationalist Trump campaign, which printed up "Adorable Deplorable" T-shirts and bumper stickers to use in key battleground states. (Clinton recently doubled down on her progressive neoliberal contempt for stupid middle America by saying this to an elite, globalist gathering in Mumbai, India: "If you look at the map of the United States, there's all that red in the middle where Trump won. I win the coasts. But what the map doesn't show you is that I won the places that represent two-thirds of

America's gross domestic product. So I won the places that are optimistic, diverse, dynamic, moving forward" ... and lost to people who, "You know, didn't like black people getting rights, don't like women, you know, getting jobs, don't want to, you know, see Indian-Americans succeeding more than you are." That was a raised middle finger from a superwealthy, arch global corporatist to all the supposedly pessimistic, slow-witted, racist, sexist and generally retrograde white-hick losers stuck between those glorious enclaves—led by Wall Street, Yale and Harvard on the East Coast and Silicon Valley and Hollywood on the West Coast—of human progress and variety [and GDP!] on the imperial shorelines. Think right-wing media picked up on that elitist, multi-cultural, globalist insult to the white heartland? You betcha!

4. Academic and other elite professional-class "progressives:" Please don't brag about your advanced degrees, your next book publication, your next sabbatical, your latest European vacation, your small teaching load, your latest fine dining experience, your favorite French wines or the fancy and expensive college or university to which you are sending your children. Working-class people don't like hearing about you enjoying your class privileges and related educational attainments. It's the overeducated and know-it-all professional and managerial classes, not the capitalist 1 percent, whom working-class people most commonly and regularly confront and see as the agents of class privilege and humiliation.

5. Take a low-paid and low-status job during this current tight-job market expansion. This will help you get a sense of the difficult and underappreciated work that tens of millions of supposedly privileged white Americans do every day: sweeping out parking garages, emptying bedpans, cleaning offices and bathrooms, driving trucks and buses, operating forklifts, waiting tables, making telemarketing calls, mowing parkways, laying foundations, extracting obstructions from production lines, filing medical documents and the like. (To make up for how you are adding to the wage-cheapening reserve army of labor, do your best to organize a union if one does not exist where you work, and make sure to pay union dues if you are in a union-protected job in a "right to work" state.)

6. Stop thinking or saying that all white America voted for the Trump. There were 156 million non-Hispanic whites eligible to vote in the 2016 elections. Trump got 63 million votes. Pretend that every single one of Trump's voters was a non-Hispanic white. We know that's not the case (Trump got 28 percent of the Latino vote, 27 percent of the Asian-American vote and 8 percent of the black vote, along with 57 percent of the white vote). But even if we imagine that every single one of Trump's voters was a non-Hispanic white, it would mean that Trump was backed by just 40 percent of the white electorate. That's hardly the whole "white tribe united" (to quote the noted black and neoliberal "Afro-pessimist" Ta-Nehisi Coates on Trump's white supporters).

7. Don't deny that candidate Trump's economic populism (however disingenuous) was part of his attraction to rural and working-class and other whites who voted for him. Yes, as numerous leftist analysts (myself included) have noted, Trump's appeal to those voters rested significantly on white nationalist racial identity. But it also relied on his economic-nationalist promise to honor the "forgotten" American heartland working-class by restoring the lost Golden Age of American manufacturing and economic "greatness." Trump showed himself far more adept—to say the least—than the establishment neoliberal Clinton when it came to tapping the economically populist sentiments of the majority white and majority working-class electorate, most of which has less than \$1,000 in its bank accounts while the top 10th of the upper U.S. 1 percent has as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent. Trump was no normal Republican 1 percent candidate.

As Thomas Ferguson, Paul Jorgensen and Jie Chen recently explained:

In 2016 the Republicans nominated yet another super-rich candidate—indeed, someone on the Forbes 400 list of wealthiest Americans. But pigeonholing him as a Romney-like Richie Rich was not easy. Like legions of conservative Republicans before him, he trash-talked Hispanics, immigrants, and women virtually non-stop, though with a verve uniquely his own. He laced his campaign with barely coded racial appeals and in the final days, ran an ad widely denounced as subtly anti-Semitic. But he supplemented these with other messages that qualified as true blockbusters: In striking contrast to every other Republican presidential nominee since 1936, he attacked globalization, free trade, international financiers, Wall Street, and even Goldman Sachs. “Globalization has made the financial elite who donate to politicians very wealthy. But it has left millions of our workers with nothing but poverty and heartache. When subsidized foreign steel is dumped into our markets, threatening our factories, the politicians do nothing. For years, they watched on the sidelines as our jobs vanished and our communities were plunged into depression-level unemployment.” ... In a frontal assault on the American establishment, the Republican standard bearer proclaimed “America First.” Mocking the Bush administration’s appeal to “weapons of mass destruction” as a pretext ... He even criticized the “carried interest” tax break beloved by high finance.”

Such populist-sounding rhetoric was part of how and why Trump defeated Clinton, who, the authors note, “emphasized candidate and personal issues and avoided policy discussions to a degree without precedent in any previous election for which measurements exist.” At the same time, Trump would have lost many of his white working-, lower- and middle-class votes to his Democratic opponent had the Democratic primaries and caucuses not been rigged against Bernie Sanders, who ran passionately against “the billionaire class” without the noxious racism, nativism and sexism that colored Trump’s campaign. Sanders might well have defeated Trump by mobilizing working-class voters of all colors, including white ones. (Whether a President Sanders could have done anything is another matter.)

8. Stop accusing U.S. white working-class people of “lacking class consciousness” just because the multibillionaire Trump did better than multimillionaire Clinton with noncollege-educated white voters. Many affluent and white, nonworking-class Trump voters lacked the allegedly class-defining college degree. Millions of working- and lower-class U.S. white citizens didn’t vote at all, as is common among lower-income Americans. The democratic socialist Sanders (currently and quietly the most popular politician in the country) would have done far better than both Clinton and Trump did with working-class white people in the general election. At the same, Trump tapped white working-class anger at the globalist financial and corporate elite (Goldman Sachs, et al.,) but also at the more liberally inclined and professional and managerial classes, whose position and meritocratic ideology is, according to historian Thomas Frank, the real face of class privilege and authority that working-class people grate under on a regular basis.

9. Don’t exaggerate the white privilege payoff in capitalist America. The income and especially the wealth gaps between non-Hispanic U.S. whites on one hand and U.S. blacks (whose median household net worth is 13 times lower than that of whites), Latinos and Native Americans are horrific. But those disparities do not change the fact that a vast swath of the U.S. white population lives below the threshold of a minimally adequate standard of living. The median white U.S. household income—\$71,300 a year—is below the Economic Policy Institute’s (EPI) rigorously calculated no-frills basic family budget—\$ 74,004—for a family that comprises two parents and two children in the relatively cheap, 89 percent white Iowa jurisdiction of Muscatine County.

Things look much worse for white privilege when you drill down further in the census data. In the nearby university enclave of Iowa City, the EPI’s basic family budget for the same-sized household is \$87,836.

In the 93 percent white Muscatine County seat city of Muscatine, median white household income is \$51,801, equivalent to just 70 percent of the EPI's basic family budget for a family of four. Or take the 93 percent white upstate Michigan town of Sheboygan (5,000 people). Median household income there is \$27,206, just 37 percent of the EPI's basic family budget (\$72,875) for Sheboygan County. The same basic story is evident across countless predominantly white towns and counties in the U.S. heartland.

Three years ago, Harvard sociologist Robert D. Putnam's rigorously researched book, "Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis," showed that social breakdown among low-income whites in the age of neoliberal capitalism was mimicking tendencies long said to characterize the black "underclass": high rates of out-of-wedlock births, widespread male joblessness, endemic addiction, violence, elevated high school dropout rates, and more. Then came news of surging opiate addiction among working-class white Americans and of rising mortality rates fed by suicide and substance abuse among middle-aged white "surplus Americans." The leading cause for these rising white "deaths of despair" cited by those who discovered them in the data is the collapse of the labor market for working-class people. Clearly the "wages of whiteness" are no ticket to the middle-class American dream for much of white America, a considerable portion of which has been rendered poor and replaceable by automation, de-unionization, globalization, the shredding of pensions and the poverty of the U.S. welfare state.

10. Appeal less (or not at all) to guilt over white privilege and more (or entirely) to white working-class people's self-interest in interracial solidarity with black, Latino, Asian and Native American working-class people on behalf of the many against the nation's wealthy few—the American oligarchy—in making the case for racial, ethnic and gender equality and civil, immigrant and gay rights. People with small savings accounts struggling to meet basic costs in a virulently unequal nation with a weak social safety net and a shortage of decent-paying jobs are not likely to respond warmly overall to outsiders who tell them how "privileged" they are by the color of their skin. Their bank accounts and more say different. They are getting shafted, and they know it. It's better to talk about:

- How the real agents of their despair are not immigrants or urban people of color but the parasitic, exploitative and obscenely rich, class-privileged, capitalist 1 percent, the nation's unelected dictatorship of money.
- How that capitalist employer and ruling class has long cultivated the racial and ethnic (and other) divisions within the working-class majority to maintain its immoral and now environmentally lethal profits and power.
- How white working-class people and working-class people of all colors and ethnicities have always done the best for themselves when they reach out across those divisions to form powerful unions and other grass-roots organization to fight the rich and powerful.
- How the "psychological wage" of whiteness—the sense that you are someone special and entitled just because you are white—is lame, self-defeating pseudo-compensation for economic exploitation by rich people.
- The many and remarkable moments when black and white North American workers joined in common struggle against capitalist exploiters, compelling the white ruling class to respond with strategies of racial divide-and-rule. "Since the 17th century," Viewpoint Magazine editor Asad Haider has reminded us, "resistance to racial oppression and [resistance to] capitalist exploitation [in North America] have gone hand in hand," led by militants and workers of all races who have understood that a racially divided working class cannot prevail over the wealthy few.

11. Drop any assumption that any but a small number of heartland whites have been given reasonable opportunities to know much if anything about the reality of racial oppression in 21st-century America. Beyond the appalling hyperconcentration of many millions of black Americans in communities that are shockingly devoid of resources and opportunities for advancement, contemporary racial segregation renders real black experience frightfully invisible to the nation's white majority. Thanks to the quietly but deeply persistent problem of U.S. racial apartheid, much of white America's image of black America is fed by wildly distorted and dichotomous media images of spectacular black success (the Obamas, Oprah and numerous superstar black athletes and entertainers) and black "underclass" criminality. To make matters worse, racist mass incarceration brings hundreds of thousands of young black urban felons into hundreds of rurally situated prisons, putting white prison personnel in highly unpleasant and conflictual contact with contemporary capitalist racial oppression's most hardened victims—not a good mix for racial healing and understanding, to say the least.

12. Last but not least, the left should approach climate change—the biggest issue of our or any time—with empathetic sensitivity to "flyover zone" America's desire for the creation of good-paying jobs. The right's influential propaganda claiming that action against global warming destroys employment chances for working-class people should not simply be met with sneering invocations of the green maxims that "there are no jobs on a dead planet" and "no economy on a dead planet." The adages are true enough, but the more politically strategic and astute point to make is that, as economist Robert Pollin showed in his 2014 book, "Greening the Global Economy," "clean energy investment projects consistently generate more jobs for a given amount of spending than maintaining or expanding a country's existing fossil fuel infrastructure. ... The massive investments in energy efficiency and clean renewable energy necessary to stabilize the climate will also drive job expansion," contrary to the "widely held view that protecting the environment and expanding job opportunities are necessarily in conflict." Besides saving prospects for livable ecology and a decent future, the green conversion required for human survival is a job creator. Imagine that.

Here again, as with my recommendations on how to advance racial justice and gender equality in the name of working-class people's solidarity, leftist progressives would be wise to elevate reasonable self-interest over guilt and shame in advancing the common good. If you grew up and lived in a mining or oil town, you'd probably be concerned about how the—yes, existentially necessary—transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy will affect job prospects for yourself and others in your community. Whether tenured liberal-leftish Obama fans like James Livingston, author of "No More Work: Why Full Employment is a Bad Idea," like it or not, working-class people still need and want to work, and not just for economic reasons. What could be more meaningful than working to save the world from its greatest scourge in this century: ecocide?



## A Gen Xer in a Baby Boomer Church,

a review of

### After the Good News:

#### **Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism**

By Nancy McDonald Ladd (2019)

Ladd, as a young UU minister for an affluent church in Washington, DC, seeks to reconcile the trauma and struggle experienced by many of her generation (Gen X) with the comfortable self-assurance of her baby boomer congregation. In response she is reviving a liturgy (readings, prayer, and music) that witnesses human failures and tragedies, not just successes and blessings, spiritual nourishment for surviving hunger and sorrow, not just celebrations of life, grieving over senseless shootings and injustices, not just individual salvation.

It is certainly true that times have been getting tougher for the younger generations, and current prospects now look even grimmer, yet this book comes across as dealing with symptoms, not causes. You'd think that seminaries would give their students a broad liberal arts and sciences education, not just an education in theology and identity. This book demonstrates that they don't.

Yes, Ladd is aware of things like escalating inequality and slowing economic growth, but she seems to have little grasp of how our corrupted system of economics and politics has driven the malaise felt by the younger generations. As a wannabe player in that system, Donald Trump knows the game plan all too well. He knows that the biggest losers over the last 40 years have been the white working class (because they had the most to lose – good industrial jobs, small businesses, houses) and that even much of the middle class has been targeted (outrageous student debt and health care bills) by a ruling class hell-bent on scamming or exploiting anyone with a lot to lose and politically vulnerable, regardless of race. Such behavior is typical of empires as they mature and turn on their own citizens after facing external limits to wealth.

Ladd, along with a good portion of academia, mistakes the symptoms of Trump's dishonesty and immorality (like scapegoating of immigrants and people of color) for the cause of the malaise. Sadly, she falls directly into the divide and conquer trap laid by clever segments of the ruling class: Blame it all on "white supremacy", ignoring class and capitalism. In fact, if you are one of the many who is less well off than your parents' generation, despite being white, you know in your bones that it's not whiteness that matters but predatory capitalism (at least if your preacher hasn't persuaded you that it's your own fault – the "blame the victim" tactic). Moreover, "white supremacy is an accusation" (the perception of a black colleague) which associates you with extremist groups like we saw in Charlottesville.

So Ladd is quite correct on the need for a new liturgy, but a deeper dive is needed to understand a civilization facing imminent "ecological overshoot and collapse". In fact I would argue that a more communal, less individualistic, theology is needed as well. Even the word "justice" has become a diversion – worthy rescues of suffering individuals or groups, yes, but in the context of a laser focus on the survival of the whole.

A review by Dick Burkhart, Seattle, WA

### **New Data Contradict the Story of "White Supremacy"**

By Dick Burkhart, Seattle, WA

Recently got the latest copy of "Democracy Magazine – A Journal of Ideas" and found a very interesting article by Robert Shapiro, who was "Bill Clinton's principle economic advisor in 1991-92 and a senior economic advisor to Hillary Clinton in 2015-16." He was trying to understand why Hillary lost. Below I review some highlights of the article and my conclusions.

It's been known for some time that the white working-class was hit hardest by the surge of predatory capitalism over the last 40 years (see [www.thirdway.org/report/white-working-class-men-in-a-changing-american-workforce](http://www.thirdway.org/report/white-working-class-men-in-a-changing-american-workforce) by Stephen Rose or [www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/casetextsp17bpea.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/casetextsp17bpea.pdf) by Ann Case & Angus Deaton, for black vs white comparisons). Now new data from a study by Robert Shapiro show dramatic numbers over just the last 10 years (2008 – 2018) for the decline of white jobs relative to black, Hispanic, and Asian (<https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/53/race-ethnicity-and-the-job-market/>). The statistics are the grimmest for the white working-class (the bottom 2/3), using numbers for non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic blacks, non-Hispanic Asians, and full and mixed Hispanics, to avoid overlap. For those with a high school diploma, white jobs declined 17%, while black jobs increased 6%, Asian jobs 39%, and Hispanic jobs 44%. For those with some college, white jobs still declined 9%, while black jobs increased 20%, Asian jobs 22%, and Hispanic jobs 47%. For those with a B.A. or more, white jobs increased 18%, but black jobs increased an amazing 53%, Asian jobs 56%, and Hispanic jobs a whopping 71%.

These astonishing numbers go a long way toward explaining the success of Trump in the scapegoating of immigrants and people of color. But they also give the lie to the concept, more popular than ever in certain liberal circles, that the supposed advantages of "whiteness" are the primary source of oppression (see "White Fragility" by Robin DiAngelo, for example). The truth is that attempts to root out "white supremacy" are like beating a dying horse. The rapidity of these demographic changes are truly staggering. It's no wonder that there is a backlash. When white working-class people get angry, or give up in despair, at the gut-wrenching decline in their standard of living, yet vote for Trump after seeing people of color surging ahead, they are too often called "racist", adding insult to injury. Thus the culture wars have become bigtime political wars.

Shapiro identifies two reasons for these big changes. One is simple demographics - immigrant populations tend to be younger than white baby boomers, who are retiring and leaving fewer offspring. An even bigger reason is that immigrant populations are generally willing to work hard and accept lower pay. A deeper analysis is given by the historian Peter Turchin (<http://peterturchin.com/cliodynamica/the-end-of-prosperity/>), whose "structural-demographic theory" identifies several sources for the oversupply of labor and the consequent decimation of good working-class jobs. In the case of the black population, these data suggest that efforts by the ruling class to end centuries of oppression have been remarkably successful. However, the one exception is that while white jobs declined about 28% for those without a high school diploma, black jobs declined even more at 34%, likely a reflection of mass incarceration and ghettoization.

These numbers also point out that education, especially higher education now makes a huge difference in the job market. In fact, when all groups are combined, those without a high school diploma lost about 19% in jobs and 4% even with a diploma, while those with some college gained 2% and college grads 27%. Another way to look at this is that 38% of the jobs are going to those with a B.A. or more, even though those with a B.A. are only 1/3 of the population, leaving huge numbers of less educated people unemployed or underemployed.

The conclusion is that those looking at "whiteness" as the source of our problems are barking up the wrong tree. Except for mass incarceration, what matters most are things like education, class, demographics, and neoliberal economics. To reorient yourself toward working-class reality, read Paul Street's marvelous essay ([www.truthdig.com/articles/how-the-left-can-gain-footing-in-white-america/](http://www.truthdig.com/articles/how-the-left-can-gain-footing-in-white-america/)).

# Racism and Capitalism—Crisis and Resistance: Exploring the Dynamic between Class Oppression and Racial Oppression

By Prof Alan Spector

**The following is the second portion of this lengthy article. The first portion was printed in the Spring 2019 edition of the MAC Arrow (i.e. Vol. 1, No. 1). If you missed the first portion of the article, or wish to re-review it, you can find that issue of the MAC Arrow on the UUMUAC web site ([www.uumuac.org](http://www.uumuac.org)). Follow the MAC Arrows tab.**

## Developing a Useful Concept of Racism

Nobody assumes that fascism, or capitalism, or socialism are only ideas—they are systems of processes. So too is racism, a complex system of processes and ideas that reinforce each other (Omi and Winant 1986). When we create definitions, we have to be careful that we do not let our words utterly redefine the reality. Our words exist to advance our understanding of processes, not to ultimately define something. Different languages use different words. The term “racism” is often too broadly defined, as when I heard a white student say that the local (white) police were “racist” against kids like him because they would not let him use his skateboard. Well, perhaps they were prejudiced against youth, but somehow, the word “racism” does not seem to apply, especially, given that the root of the term “racism” is “race.” At the opposite extreme are those who insist that “racism” should only be used in reference to “black–white” relations in the United States. That seems to be too narrow. It is important to understand the social–political–economic processes if we are to have a definition that is useful. There are other “oppressions” that share much in common with racist oppression—discrimination based on age, or against those with different ability, discrimination based on height, or weight or perceived “beauty” and certainly discrimination based on gender. But while these Spector 7 have much in common, there is something distinctive that runs through discrimination based on perceived “race” as well as ethnicity (often different from perceived “race”), language, religion in some but not all instances, and even citizenship. Imperialism also relies on racism to justify the extreme exploitation and often violence that victims of imperialism experience. What is distinctive is the role of separation. Wealthy powerful people once were young and will someday be old. They might bear a child with a physical or mental “disability.” Men or women generally have someone in their life with whom they love. Such people may still practice discrimination or have prejudiced attitudes based on age, or “ability” or gender, but it is much easier to marginalize, isolate, and create a culture of “otherness” against people who are more physically separated, either by origin or by design. This facilitates discrimination and oppression. None of this is absolute, of course. There are many exceptions, but the dynamic that is facilitated by separation has some distinctive characteristics. Besides so-called race and ethnicity, religious conflict is sometimes characterized by this dynamic. Not absolutely, but often, religion is confounded (sometimes intentionally) by racist pseudoscience; the average person in the United States does not picture a European when asked to picture a Muslim. Consider imperialist Japan’s abuse of Chinese and Korean women; Nazi and other European slaughter of Jews; Zionist discrimination against Arabs; Muslim discrimination against Buddhists in Afghanistan and Buddhist assaults on Muslims in Myanmar; Hindu assaults on Muslims in India; discrimination against Roma (so-called gypsies); non-European immigrants in Europe; Northern Italian scorn of Southern Italians; the mistreatment of indigenous people from Canada to Latin America to Australia to Northeast India; and conflicts among Christians in Yugoslavia or Ireland and of course, against especially black people in the United States, and Latinos and Muslims—wherever there is widespread discrimination or conflict that spills over to civilians, we see a commonality centered on so-called race or ethnicity or, often, religion.

Because separation is such a core feature to this particular cluster of discriminations that I am categorizing, imprecisely, as “racism,” it therefore means that the struggle against all forms of separation/segregation is absolutely essential to the struggle against these forms of racism, just as the struggle against racist oppression is the cutting edge of the struggle against capitalist oppression. Again, there are other forms of discrimination and oppression that are deadly and need to be opposed. And the cluster of discriminations that I am including as types of “racism” are not identical, but all definitions are clusters with fuzzy edges, and this helps to clarify what is common in the dynamics of these discriminations. While we do not want to get mystical with numbers, it is interesting that the wage gap between white and black workers in the United States has remained around 60 percent for the past 50 years. That is very close to the wage gap between “whites” and Hispanics in the United States, Protestant and Catholic workers in Northern Ireland, between Jewish and Israeli Arabs (citizens of Israel) workers and between white workers and Caribbean/African/Pakistani/Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain. Some places are more extreme (South Africa) and some are less. It is worth noting that the “wealth gap” (as opposed to wage gap) between white and black families (how much in total assets a family owns minus liabilities) in the United States is nearly 20 to 1, higher than in South Africa. In any case, it would be very wrong to reduce all the multidimensional, life-destroying forms of oppression to a simple “wage gap”; the point here is to simply explore some of the core dynamics that drive these processes.

### Ideas, Behaviors and “White Privilege?”

Ideas are important. The complexity of our ideas is what separates us from other species and what gives rise to social organization. All kinds of ideas can pop into people’s heads in all kinds of combinations of ways; our creative imaginations generate so many different thoughts that it is difficult to conclude whether one or another random idea is more important. While the initial flash that sparks an idea is certainly important to explore, it is more important to understand why certain ideas take hold among large numbers of people while others are discarded. Whether a person might randomly ponder about the importance of supposed “racial” differences, or height, or deepness of voice is less the central issue than how one’s life experiences, and especially the social–political–economic structure rewards, reinforces, perpetuates, systematizes, and institutionalizes those ideas. To see the genesis of systems of racist exploitation/oppression as being within the minds of people begs the question of why there is not a similar, massive, worldwide system of stratification, exploitation, and oppression based on more documentable physical differences, such as height or eyesight, rather than the conveniently flexible, unscientific notions of race, often “flexibly” confounded with culture. If racist exploitation and oppression by the powerful exists to serve the material interests of the capitalist class (as a whole, with exceptions of course), why, then do some members of the working class go along with this oppression, or worse, sometimes participate in it? Since the late 1960s, it has become fashionable to assert that white people, as a group, have interests that are opposed to the interests of racial minorities, especially black people, and are fundamentally allied with the white capitalists who wield economic and political power in capitalist society. Sometimes this takes the form of asserting that there are great psychological benefits associated with feeling superior. While there is, no doubt, some satisfaction that some white people derive from not being in the more oppressed group, it is doubtful that most white people walk around constantly enjoying, in a self-aware way, the fact that black people, in general, have lower economic and social standing in U.S. society. But what of the material advantages afforded to white people in general? Can they be so easily dismissed? On average, white people earn about 65 percent more in wages per capita than black people (or Hispanic/Latino people). The typical wealth of white households is about 20 times the median wealth of black households—mainly because of home ownership. Equality of public educational facilities is not guaranteed by law, and educational opportunities in the black community are very limited (Kozol 2012).

Discrimination in hiring persists (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). Black people are incarcerated more often and for longer periods of time than white people for similar alleged offenses. Black poverty is higher, unemployment is much higher, discrimination in employment has been absolutely documented, infant mortality rates are scandalous and devastating, and black people have higher mortality rates from most diseases and live shorter lives. There is no question that taken as a statistical group, white people, on average, have easier lives. There are, of course, many white people who have more difficult lives than some black people, but again, taken as an average, there is no question that racist exploitation and oppression are devastatingly real. This reality must be exposed, called out again and again, and fought with every ounce of energy that we can muster. The question becomes: Do white people, as a whole, benefit from the existence of racist exploitation and oppression? Is the term “white privilege” the best way to describe the differentials between the two groups? Clearly, wealthy white people benefit from racist exploitation and the oppression that sustains it. Their wealth is derived from the profits from the working class, enhanced by racist (and imperialist) wage policies. White working-class people live longer lives and generally have better health, better schooling, and nicer homes than do black working-class people. I can personally detail encounters with traffic police where I likely avoided deserved penalties because I am “white.” So clearly, and unambiguously, there are advantages, material, life-enhancing, life-sustaining advantages that even many white working-class people experience. But the core question remains: Is it a “Privilege,” with an uppercase “P,” for most non-rich white folks to live under capitalism? Is there a difference between using the language of “relative advantages” even “huge relative advantages” as opposed to language that implies that it is in the fundamental material interests of most white people to support the exploitation and oppression of blacks and other racial-ethnic minorities? If it is, then the interests of all white people would lie in suppressing others, and there is no hope for white people, except to appeal to some sort of moral self sacrifice. Such is the language of “giving up one’s white privilege.” What does that mean, exactly? Sometimes these phrases become a way of symbolically asserting something without having to actually do anything. Surely, white people, all people, should be willing to risk their position, their status, their material wellbeing, to protect, and defend the condition of others experiencing oppression. But one is reminded of President Clinton “apologizing for slavery” while slashing welfare support and being complicit in the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of black men. Interestingly, many of the ones who assert that “all white people are guilty” often end up mainly blaming white working-class people and offering milder critiques to those, like themselves, who are enlightened (and generally of somewhat more affluent means). It also often only treads very “lightly” on those black politicians who themselves are often fronting for rich (white) capitalist interests. None of this is meant to excuse active participation, complicity, or even passive acceptance by white people of the oppression of others. But would we then say that an unemployed black worker in the United States is “Privileged” because she does not live in poverty in Ghana, and is that Ghanaian “privileged” over someone in Ethiopia? All of this moralistic rhetoric (embraced by many capitalist foundations, by the way) obscures the causes and genuine interest groups that fundamentally sustain this oppressive, racist system. In fact, by diverting the focus away from the capitalist political-economic basis for modern racism, this “guilt” approach actually dilutes the struggle against racism. If we are all guilty, then none are more culpable than others and we wallow in a swamp of original sin rather than organizing to fight against the oppression. The problem is not that it is “antiwhite;” the problem is that by failing to focus the struggle against racist exploitation and oppression on the main causes, it sustains not only class exploitation and oppression in general but more specifically racist exploitation and oppression. The problem is that it is not just “antiwhite,” but that, in effect, it is “antiblack.” This is related to criticisms of Obama that are often dismissed as racist; many, many of those criticisms are racist. But some of those criticisms are based on the belief that Obama is not opposing racism enough, and in fact, that some of his policies sustain racism against black working-class people, Latinos, and “people of color” in other countries. Do most white working-class people benefit from living in this capitalist system? Certainly within the United States, and many other places, wages for white workers are lower where the gap between black and white is larger, and where wages for black workers are higher, including relative to white worker wages, the wages of the white workers are also higher

Widening the gap doesn't mean "there's more for the white workers;" on the contrary, narrowing the gap makes it more difficult for one group to be used against the other to lower the wages for both. As the relative gap between black and white family incomes narrowed, the absolute economic condition of white families improved. In recent decades, as the gap between black and white family incomes has widened, the absolute economic condition of white families has declined. One did not rise at the expense of the other. But there are even more profound reasons for "majority" "white" working class (very loosely defined here to include all sorts of service, white-collar, semiprofessional, and some professional people) to oppose racism. It is because the profits made from racist exploitation and the political disunity fostered by racist culture/ideology is what sustains this capitalist system of war, of economic instability, of artificially limited scientific, especially medical research, of unhealthy foods and lifestyles, of corrupt, superficial, competitive culture that corrodes and destroys human relationships. And then there's war. Do most white folks benefit from that? Is it a "privilege" for most working-class (broadly defined) people to live under capitalism? If not, what would it take to change the situation? How important is racist superexploitation to the capitalist system. Consider if the U.S. capitalist class simply raised the wages of all black workers (not even counting Latinos) to be equal to the average wages of the average white worker, the capitalist system would collapse. That is how important racist superexploitation is to the capitalist system and that is how important the struggle against racism is for the broad struggle for social justice against capitalist oppression. Sure, there are perks. And the perks are not just illusory. They are real. Real, genuine, palpable, tasty, health giving, life sustaining. But they are real like the real cheese, tasty, healthy, life-sustaining cheese ... in the mousetrap. As social scientists, as humanists, as thinkers we have to learn to see beyond superficial appearances. The cheese looks good. It is good. It is not illusory. But what is it attached to?

## Oppose Color-blind Racism

The discourse around these issues is so saturated with racism that it is easy, but wrong, to categorize what is being put forward here as typical "color-blind racism" that is substituting bland "class rhetoric" as a way to avoid acknowledging the lifedestroying role of racist oppression and as a way of avoiding confronting the ways that many white people, including working-class people, act to help sustain racism. Critiquing the notion that all whites fundamentally benefit from racist arrangements is not necessarily "protecting" white people from having to accept responsibility for behaviors that may be complicit, or worse, in sustaining racism. It is exactly to confront white folks, and all folks, with the understanding that if they/we are serious about ending racist oppression, we must go after the roots of that—the capitalist class relations that create, reward, and sustain racist oppression, and if we are serious about ending all forms of exploitation, oppression, and subjugation, we must put the struggle against racism at the forefront of all struggles. Because there are so many examples throughout history of calls for unity, which then kicked black folks, in particular, off the train once it was running, the burden of proof lies with those who do receive the immediate advantages to demonstrate their willingness to risk those advantages. That is not the same as moralistically declaring that one has "given up their Privilege" (sometimes quite profitably by giving workshops to help people assuage their guilt or worse, a public relations for institutions that maintain racist policies). But the skepticism about "class" rhetoric has a real basis in history. The old slogan of "Black and White Unite" should be "Black and White Unite against Racism" because the struggle against racist exploitation, oppression, and ideology must be the cutting edge of the struggle for social justice, exactly because it is the fracture that weakens the movement for social justice while at the same time, holds the key to being the point of entry to weaken the oppressive structures of capitalism. Racist exploitation and oppression grow out of the class relations of society, but they are not simply collapsible to "higher wages." On the contrary, they are the sharpest expression of capitalist oppression, as if the blade of a sword is the weapon of class struggle, but the very edge of the blade is the struggle against all forms of racism,

including, as mentioned, imperialism. Asserting that racist exploitation and oppression flow out of the class struggle need not be the same as supporting the notion of “color-blind racism.” In fact, as discussed earlier, the edge of the blade and the rest of the blade are not two separate things; they are fundamentally parts of the same thing, so fundamentally ingrained in each other that neither could exist in any serious sense without the other. The struggle against racism must be at the forefront of all struggles because racist oppression saturates all aspects of capitalist social relations, whether we realize it or not.

### *Why Do You Care?*

*Every so often, some asks me: “Why do you care so much about racism? Is it some sort of ‘thing’ with you?” Mostly white folks ask me that, students wonder why it runs throughout my courses, rather than just being a “one-week unit” in Introductory Sociology or Social Problems or Stratification. Occasionally, serious black folks ask me versions of that question. The first time I was asked it was during a campaign to save the job of a black professor who was being unfairly terminated. Someone came up to me and asked me why I cared so much about it. I just looked at him and asked: “Should I care about you?” He looked confused. So I asked him again, looking him straight in the eye: “Should I care about you?” “Well, er, um, sure, I hope so,” he said. “So,” I replied, “what kind of question is that?” The point is that antiracists have to stop being so defensive or apologetic about the importance of this struggle. Many humanists/leftists/progressives, whatever ... ponder the question of why there is no strong leftist, or prosocialist, or class conscious movement in the United States. The ones in Europe have many, many flaws, but compared to them, we have a situation in the United States where tens of millions of people believe that Obama is a socialist. Conservatives in Europe are more progressive than many in the liberal wing of the U.S. Democratic Party on many issues. There are lots of reasons why there is so little, for now, class consciousness in the United States. Partly it is the culture of individualism, intensified by home ownership, the automobile culture, the mythical cowboy culture, the “United States is Supreme” type of nationalism, the temporary bribes (“cheese?”) of easy credit to temporarily maintain a lifestyle with some physical comfort. But a core reason is the racist division within the population, something that has been ingrained in U.S. culture since two centuries before there was a United States! While European imperialists certainly used different aspects of racism in their imperial conquests, mainly overseas, we now see more of the U.S. type of internal racism developing in Europe as well, and we see a divided movement, split between leftists preoccupied with labor issues and ignoring racism, and ethnic groups immersed in identity politics who remain skeptical of the traditional Left. Who benefits from the existence of a race-ethnic based “reserve army of lower paid labor?” Who benefits from a divided grassroots populace, divided by illusions, and forced institutional arrangements based on politically constructed, perceived “race and ethnicity?” Hence, yes, we all should “care.” Not as charity, but for survival. Our lives and our destinies are one. If, for example, all the black workers in the United States, and nobody else, had gone on strike at the start of the devastatingly destructive Iraq War, it would have been the most powerful strike in the history of the United States, and perhaps a million lives there as well as thousands of lives here, and millions more impacted negatively by that war—they/we would have been spared great misery. It’s not charity. It’s sisterhood/brotherhood. It’s what the word “solidarity” means. All this should lead to the realization that the struggle against racism, broadly defined, is not just another of the many struggles we need to carry on in order to create a humanistic world based on social justice. Just as racist exploitation, oppression, and ideas saturate every part of human life, distorting our institutions and relationships in complex, subtle, and not-so-subtle ways—just as all of our struggles for social justice are undermined by the existence of racist ideas and racist institutional arrangements in society ... so then must we ensure that the struggle against racism is part of every struggle for social justice in which we are involved, from the most explicitly political to the most personal in our relationships. It is not so-called reverse racism (a nonsensical rhetorical tool to deny the intensity of actual racism) to emphasize the struggle against racism any more than it is reverse discrimination to toss a buoyant lifesaving device to someone in the water when someone on the boat complains that they want one also!*

And it is not “charity” to offer solidarity to brothers and sisters. It is important to keep in mind that in the most fundamental sense, black people (and increasingly many Latino people) have not been “outside” the system; black and Latino working-class people have been holding up the system as agricultural workers, steel workers, auto workers, coal miners, health care workers, and more, while being underpaid not just in wages but in social services, education, and housing. It is not a question of “white” allies; it is a question of solidarity and equality. However, it is true that most “white” people do not grasp how profoundly widespread and intense racial discrimination is—from the different types of anxiety that white people feel when followed by a police officer to the humiliation of being followed in retail stores or vilified in the media. And this is on top of the massive economic discrimination. So the burden is on all of us, but there is a special need for those with weaker understanding of these dynamics to take the initiative to become educated and committed to opposing them. Many people have had the experience of someone asking the oft-repeated question of “Why do the black students sit together in the cafeteria?” Perhaps readers of this might ask that question themselves. One could try to consider sociological explanations that evade issues of race, or of networks, but even without looking too deeply into it, shouldn’t the question be: “Have you ever gone over and introduced yourself?” Perceived so-called black separatism is less widely practiced than is exaggerated in the media and more important, “white separatism” is often considered “natural” and the question is seldom asked: “Why do the white students sit together in the cafeteria?” Actually, while the media discourse on race and racism still mainly reinforces racist divisions, and while economic and social gaps are widening, it seems to be the case on many colleges, especially working-class ones, that there is more social interaction than in the past. This is good, important, and needs to be nurtured. Antiracists should not be apologetic or timid. We are not the weird ones. We have to internalize and project, with confidence and strength—not arrogance or elitism, but confidence and strength, that it is the racists who are the weird ones. We have to practice thinking and saying things like: “Do people really believe that stuff?” rather than asking people to give up their perceived “normalcy” and join us, the abnormal ones, on a great moral crusade. Seriously, racist ideas are nonsense and, again without exhibiting personal arrogance or using personal insults, these ideas should be confronted the same way we would confront the idea that horses can talk.

### Racism and Capitalism—Crisis and Resistance

The struggle for social justice is more important now than it has been in the past 75 years, perhaps ever. The world is an increasingly dangerous place. Capitalism as a world system has limits, and while it has not reached its limits everywhere, there are huge pressures building up. Severe cutbacks in the standard of living even in the wealthy countries, fragmentation, intensified nationalism camouflaged by talk of global economic integration. The pressures will try to be contained through cutbacks, then political suppression, but ultimately, they will likely explode in one way or another. If that sounds apocalyptic and silly, just ask why should we believe that after hundreds of generations, this generation will be the one that sees the start of eternal peace here on Earth. The youth of today will face a much more difficult world than my generation faced. We cannot fully prevent certain massive political–economic processes from developing along certain pathways, but we most certainly can have an impact on how devastating they will be and how we can make the world a better place. The struggle against racist exploitation and oppression can never be won without defeating the profit motive of capitalism that rewards it. It is not just the “1 percent,” but rather the system as a whole, which rewards and therefore creates these practices. The struggle for social justice on all fronts, the struggle against capitalism and its destructive dynamic of profits over people can never be won without a massive struggle against all forms of racism. This is not just a slogan. The two are not “two”—they are



integrated, fully unified parts of a single system. Let us all commit ourselves, again and again through action, to transform our neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, community centers into self-conscious centers working for social justice, with the struggle against racism ever present in those struggles. And let us continue to transform the Association for Humanist Sociology (AHS) into an organization that can set that example to ourselves, our colleagues, our students and staff, and our communities by fully incorporating into AHS the struggle against all forms of racism and imperialism and by transforming the membership of AHS to more fully reflect the “racial–ethnic” and international diversity of the human race.