Forging a Unified Proletariat

Introduction

Capitalism is typically considered to operate independently of race; race is thought to be little more than a social characteristic of a worker, and workers of a given skill level are considered interchangeable. History does not bear this out. Racial division was crucial for slavery and thus for the cotton trade, the first major capitalist industry. Cotton production was equally predicated on colonialism in Asia and expropriation of land from Indigenous tribes in the Americas. None of this was possible without a powerful nation-state, massive violence, and political ideologies of racism to justify these actions. Capitalism created not one but two proletariats: the first, colored (initially slave and colonial) and the second, white. Property ownership was not only a foundation of labor exploitation writ large; it helped structure divisions between the two proletariats.

At the base of all capitalism is politics, which can spawn a variety of economic logics. (Crouch 2005) As the economic historian Karl Polanyi, noted, humans are not economic but political animals, “[t]he economic factor, which underlines all social life, no more gives rise to definite incentives than the equally universal law of gravitation... With man -- the political animal -- everything is given not by natural, but by social circumstances.” (Polanyi 2014) The early period of capitalism was what historian Sven Beckert calls "war capitalism." War capitalism, necessary for slavery and colonialism, enabled the development of European and U.S. manufacturing that in turn strengthened the capacity of Western nation-states to spread capitalism. (Beckert 2014) These states would not have been possible, particularly in democratic regimes, without ongoing support from a significant part of the working class—the white proletariat. The construction of racially divided proletariats was not a natural or inevitable outcome of capitalism, but the intended consequence of social and political ideology and actions.
Differences in property status helped to separate the two proletariats. For millennia, property was conceived as an inseparable part of political, religious, and social hierarchies, and so it was for blacks prior to the U.S. Civil War. Capitalist land grabs were also justified as ‘natural’ using the Lockean argument that God intended land to be used for the benefit of the greatest number of people, and capitalists were more industrious utilizers than Native Americans. (Wood 2012), p. 268. Property has more recently been considered the result of heroic individual achievement or merit. All of these conceptions of property are political; all come with embedded racial narratives to explain the separation of the two proletariats: blacks are not human at all (slavery); biologically inferior and incapable of industriousness (Jim Crow); culturally inferior or lumpen (recent). At various points in history, many on the U.S. white Left endorsed each of these viewpoints, yet held to the ostensible position that there is a single proletariat that itself is confused about it’s true interest. W.E.B. Du Bois held a radically different view, arguing that capitalism indeed divided the proletariat in two:

“[the] black proletariat is not part of the white proletariat...while Negro labor in America suffers because of the fundamental inequities of the whole capitalist system, the lowest and most fatal degree of its suffering comes not from the capitalists but from fellow white laborers. It is white labor that deprives the Negro of his right to vote, denies him education, denies him affiliation with trade unions, expels him from decent houses and neighborhoods, and heaps upon him the public insults of open color discrimination.” (Du Bois 1995)

The Non-Racial Capitalism View

To explicate Du Bois’s notion of two proletariats, I begin with the traditional argument that race and capitalism are not linked. Ellen Wood, a Marxist historian of capitalism, says of worker identity and consciousness:

"Even when the 'assemblage and transformation' of the labor force is complete, people are at best assembled only in productive units, factories, and so on. Their assemblage in class formations which transcend such individual units is a process of a different kind, one that depends upon their consciousness of, and propensity to act upon, a common experience and common interests.” (Wood 1995,2016), p. 91 (emphasis added).

Wood maintains that workplaces are the primary spatial locations where
workers from all backgrounds develop such a common experience and interests. This view of workers’ lives is incomplete. Workers have meaningful experiences in neighborhoods, schools, and churches that are, in the U.S. at least, typically ethnically and racially distinct. Conversely, workers shop in malls that often gather far more people than workplaces, and they may feel an exhilarating sense of equality and commonality in being able to freely roam around glitzy shops choosing products to covet or buy (on credit). How do we know whether common experiences at the workplace have greater impact on workers than their common experiences in malls, or outweigh their racially distinct encounters in neighborhoods, churches, schools, and with the police? What if narratives in and of the workplace (say, by unions) are less compelling and coherent explanations of their lives than those of race, ethnic, or religious leaders? Neighborhoods and shopping centers embody property relations just as much as do workplaces, and discourse about property is ubiquitous, so why privilege workplace discourse for the formation of workers’ consciousness?

Of race and gender, Wood says:

“[I]t is not so clear that racial or gender equality are antagonistic to capitalism, or that capitalism cannot tolerate them as it cannot deliver world peace or respect the environment . . . .The extraction of surplus value from wage laborers takes place in a relationship between formally free and equal individuals and does not presuppose differences in juridical or political status. In fact, there is a positive tendency in capitalism to undermine such differences, and even to dilute identities like gender or race, as capital strives to absorb people into the labor abstracted from any specific identity."

". . . .[I]f capital derives advantages from racism or sexism, it is . . . because they disguise the structural realities of the capitalist system and because they divide the working class.” (Wood 1995, 2016), p. 266-267.

During the period of Jim Crow and slavery, contrary to Wood’s argument, great differences in juridical and political status existed between white workers and workers of color. (Nelson 2001) Further, according to Wood, race is useful to capitalism only in so far as it disguises capitalism’s true nature and divides workers. This argument presumes that it is not essential for capitalism to divide workers in this way; capitalists have other ways to subdue workers. Race is thereby not a
necessary “structural reality” of capitalism. However, in the actual lived world, there has been no experience of pure capitalist logic in where race (and gender) did not play a crucial dividing role. Wood creates an imaginary world of labor, “abstracted from any specific identity”; in which capitalism is devoid of its deepest political contradictions. She then credits a “positive tendency in capitalism,” rather than intrepid political movements against capitalism, for victories over the inherent racial and gender oppression structured within capitalism. Here is history turned upside down.

A contrary Marxian analysis of race was put forward by, among others, Jamaican-born British cultural theorist Stuart Hall. Hall attributed views such as Wood’s to “reductionism” in analysis of capitalism. Reductionism most often takes the form of economism:

“...a specific theoretical approach which tends to read the economic foundations of society as the only determining structure. The approach...has little or no theoretical room left in it for ways of conceptualizing the political and ideological dimensions, let alone ways of conceptualizing other types of social differentiation such as social divisions and contradictions arising around race, ethnicity, nationality and gender.” (Hall 1996), p. 417-418.

Hall notes that Marxists often reduce even economic study by prioritizing production relations in the workplace over other equally important forms of economic activity such as consumption, exchange, and social reproduction—for example, education, healthcare, housing, shopping malls, and finance. In politics, reductionism conceives of “class struggle” as between agents of the working class and agents of the capitalist elite, rather than as consisting of fluid sites of contention, complex pacts among workers, and contentious sets of alliances across economic divides (Hall 1996), p. 425.

Politics is constructed through discourse, and the ideas and culture informing discourse thereby acquire material force. Ideas and culture cannot be reduced to simplistic categories like Wood’s notion of “class.” Human beings are

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1 See also, Dawson, M. C. (2016). "Hidden in Plain Sight: A Note on Legitimation Crisis and the Racial Order." Critical Historical Studies(Spring).
historical beings, influenced by all kinds of past discourses going back to the Stone Age and forward into imaginary worlds. Hall insisted on a non-essentialist understanding of both race and class. He also maintained that the modern state is far more important and complex than Marx or Weber ever conceived of it, “The state is no longer conceived as simply an administrative and coercive apparatus--it is also 'educative and formative',” and it provides much of the moral and ethical underpinning of society." (Hall 1996), p 448.

The implication of Hall's argument for traditional Marxism is significant: state policies like social security, public housing, land-use laws, public schools, legal segregation, immigration, or communication licensing may shape consciousness more than workplaces. To Hall, the “structural realities” of capitalism are not chained to the economy; how to understand and organize workers is a far more complex question than reductionism allows. While it is true that the cultural influences and institutional structures of society are bound by material and ideational capacities--this is where Marx’s materialist emphasis on history and economic conditions comes in, and why Hall considers himself Marxist -- beyond this, there are no limits or guarantees of what can or will happen. This means that the social category of race might be constitutive of capitalism, as well as the other way around. Whether there is a single or double proletariat is a matter for empirical investigation; it cannot be dismissed a priori by a predetermined capitalist “logic.”

Why Language Matters

I think it important to distinguish the concept of two proletariats in part to address the vision and imagery of the U.S. Left, that in turn leads to differences in political strategy and policy, and perhaps also to changes in emotional appeal. Here too are theoretical and historical/cultural points to be made; I can only allude to them in this paper.

On the theoretical side, I support the notion that language is two-sided. Humans use language to describe objects. For example, in science there is a view

2 Sizek and Karatani make this point in a different way....
that humans are like other animals, and can be observed and understood similarly. This lends itself to natural science epistemology in the social sciences. Yet, humans also use language to provide meaning, which is unlike other animals and the understanding of meaning calls for a different epistemology than natural science. The philosopher Charles Taylor wrote: “New descriptive languages lay out new typographies, a new disposition of places. But humans as self-interpreting animals are partly constituted by their own self-descriptions. And so a new topography of the self cannot but have existential import.” (Taylor 2016), p. 41. As Marx and Engels noted in their discussion of modern cities and workplaces, humans are also partly constituted by the environments they make (and choose) for themselves. This makes the line between external (objective) and internal (normative) causes quite blurry. The meanings that people attach to identities such as race, for example, are vitally important and impact how people think and act. This is so whether or not these meanings are scientifically accurate.

Language, on the other side from description, is a form of human communion. Language on this side can be strongly emotive: words like ‘nigger’ and ‘bitch’ are emotive valuations, as are the words ‘inspiring’ and ‘creepy.’ Modern human thinking, as the cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter writes, operates in the form of praxis—of an often unconscious back and forth between scientific and existential categories. Building on Fanon, she writes, “We therefore now need to initiate the exploration of the new reconceptualized form of knowledge that would be called for by Fanon’s redefinition of being human as that of skins (phylogeny/ontogeny) and masks (sociogeny). Therefore bios and mythoi. And notice! One major implication here: humanness is no longer a noun. Being human is a praxis.” (McKittrick 2015), p. 23. To take race again, is ‘white’ a valid scientific descriptive category or an existential one? It is clearly the latter, yet this does not preclude thousands of studies concerning racial differences in outcomes in all manner of things. Humans continually mix up categories, and science is often used to shore up existential
categories rather than to undermine them. Good examples exist in the literature on policing.³

There is a strong tendency in social science and in most Marxism to take one-sidedly descriptive natural science approaches to social analysis. The political theorist Jon Elster writes, for example, that, “The Marxist methodology that [we ought] emphatically to reject [includes] methodological holism, the view that in social life there exist wholes or collectivities, statements about which cannot be reduced to statements about the member individuals.” (Peffer 1990), p. 21. If the meaning of Elster’s methodological individualism is to criticize social analysis that has no traces in individual motivation and behavior, this is fine but seems mundane. What methodological individualism downplays, and what is most important in social analysis, is peoples’ social nature. Pride, shame, race, and class are social and emotional concepts. When used descriptively (boiled down to individual attributes) they lose their essential meaning. Class, race, and poverty are not so much descriptions of individual conditions and attributes as they are markers of social relationships of domination and emotional dislike.

Another consequence of using a natural science approach to social analysis is that is downplays what goes on inside of people’s heads. Culture and the flow of ideas is too messy for natural science-like causal explanations. Yet humans are motivated by beliefs and not simply material interests. For example, Marxists held that it was revolutionary consciousness—an understanding of one’s objective position and interests in the economic and political system—that would lead to revolutionary action. Yet in Du Bois’s study of the Civil War, it was religious belief—not a studied calculation of interests—that motivated most slaves to rebel: “The mass of slaves, even the more intelligent ones, and certainly the great group of field hands, were in religious and hysterical fervor. This was the coming of the Lord. This was the fulfillment of prophecy and legend. It was the Golden Dawn, after chains of a

thousand years.” (Robinson 1983, 2000), p. 237. Humans are irreducibly motivated by natural and existential causes, however difficult this makes matters for social scientists and analytical philosophers.

In looking at the concept of the proletariat through a bi-furcated praxis lens, I want to suggest that the concept not only played a scientific role of describing trends in capitalism. It also played a critical existential role. Marx and Engels depicted the European and US industrial proletariat, in the 19th century composed almost entirely of white workers, as the only truly broad minded and revolutionary class. Peasants and transients (the lumpen proletariat) where narrow-minded, conservative, and on a global scale mostly of color; their destiny was to serve the bourgeoisie or come under the progressive leadership of the industrial proletariat. This depiction did not prove to be historically accurate—it was peasants who provided most of the fervor for socialism in the 20th century, the white industrial proletariat often reactionary. But the heroic image of white industrial workers leading masses of backward peasants fit nicely into prevalent 19th century and persistent 20th century narratives. The white Left in the U.S. has held on hard to this cultural trope, despite it’s profound analytical failings, in part because it conveys a feeling of confidence, a dignified narrative in spite of white workers’ role in slavery and genocide, and it projects continued mastery over black and brown communities. To this extent, it is an impediment to building solidarity between the two proletariats—so needed for progressive change.

1. Race, Class, and Property Thru the Civil War

To make the argument that capitalism operates according to a non-racial logic, many historians and social scientists have argued that the slave South was “pre-capitalist.” (Genovese 1966, Wilson 1978, 1980) This gave rise to the related idea that modern racism is a lingering by-product of pre-capitalist feudal social relations, and that racism will gradually disappear as social consciousness catches up with modern capitalist production relations. Subsequent scholarship on slavery and the ante-bellum South has undermined this notion. (Hahn 1983, Johnson 2013) Slavery was thoroughly capitalist, and it was undergirded by a highly specific
political and racial construct – only Africans were made slaves. Indeed, capitalism pre-dates slavery in the U.S.; Britain originally chartered corporations to settle the colonies and make profits. Early settlers in the U.S. were members of these corporations, “and the consolidation of the slave system served to transform one form of corporate elite into another.” (Martinot 2003), p. 43. Exempting capitalism from actual early U.S. history requires extensive myth-making that sanitizes the origins of capitalist private wealth, minimizes slavery and glosses over the pure expropriation of Native American land. (Wald 1993), p. 26.

Blacks’ social, economic, and political exclusion, and similar conditions in colonies, is what led Du Bois to argue that capitalism structured two proletariats:

...in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power veil and conceal. The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown, and black. (Du Bois, 1992 #30), p. 15.

Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor, and a new labor problem, involving all white labor, arose both in Europe and America. (Du Bois, 1992 #30), p. 5.

We can see that Du Bois distinguished labor of color, capitalism’s “foundation stone” or what I will call the ‘first proletariat,’ from U.S. and European “all-white” labor who, with the aid of high profits coming from super-exploitation of workers of color, were offered a “veil” of power and cultured achievement such as that found in modern cities. Moreover, capitalism offered white workers, the second proletariat, a special role in relation to the first proletariat:

The system of slavery demanded a special police force and such a force was made possible and unusually effective by the presence of the poor whites.... Considering the economic rivalry of the black and white worker in the North, it would have seemed natural that the poor white would have refused to police slaves. But two considerations led him in the opposite direction. First of all, it gave him work and some authority as overseer, slave driver, and member of the patrol system. But above and beyond this, it fed his vanity because it associated him with the masters. (Du Bois, 1992 #30), p. 12.
Du Bois further argued that poor whites abandoned their own class interests in pursuit of the “American idea” that they could become “future exploiters” of workers of color. For Du Bois, capitalism did not emerge separate from the state or from racial categories; it depended on both. Black and white workers were never inter-changeable; from the start, race was fundamental to policing and maintaining the system. The two proletariats were formed intentionally in opposition to one another, with race as the dividing line. Before rule by property elites could be challenged, the two proletariats would have to overcome this division.

**Property and Social Identity**

In the 1820s and 1830s, as capitalism developed, strong class tensions emerged between ordinary white farmers and banks. “Hugely profitable because they collected interest on loans considerably exceeding their real capital, banks seemed from the beginning threatening and fraudulent to the subsistence-oriented sector of American society.” (Sellers 1991), p. 46. Yet, the greatest political conflicts in the US at this time were over land, especially as territory opened up west of the Mississippi River. Slave-owners wanted to expand slavery westward as many decades of cultivation had depleted land on existing plantations. They came into conflict with northerners who saw the future of the country, and of democracy, as based on small-scale entrepreneurship and ample land for ordinary citizens. (Foner 1970), p. 316. Neither side of the conflict, however, embraced anti-racism. Those opposing expansion of slavery into the West, the Free Soilers, were typically adamant that free blacks be excluded from the territory as well.

Truly democratic whites had much to worry about: fugitive slave laws implored white citizens to hand over runaway slaves to at the risk of imprisonment—or worse. Many white abolitionists took serious personal risks to shield slaves and help them find safety in parts of northern states or Canada. In these and other ways, being white, or staying white, was thus a political/ethical choice closely connected to one’s commitment to genuine democracy. Property ownership was part of this larger dilemma of whiteness; it was a realm of individual freedom only for those
willing to subvert the freedom of non-white others. Du Bois thus described abolitionism as “abolition-democracy,” arguing that the two things, if indeed democracy requires a minimum level of human decency, could not be separated.

**Property, Race, Law, Politics, and Insoluble Contradictions**

In America whiteness freed whites from being made slaves. Property ownership was made conditional on race (and gender) from the beginning. Paradoxical efforts to merge slavery and democracy created policy and legal conflicts, and even burdens for some whites that ultimately helped lead to the Civil War. For example, the constitution of 1787 counted slaves as 3/5 a person for the purpose of apportioning seats in Congress. This provided whites in the South with far more voting power than other white citizens, which they then used to reduce their tax burdens relative to northerners and to secure other advantages. (Einhorn 2006)

Non-slave corporations (Northern-based) also were challenged to draw legal distinctions between themselves and slaves, the other government-sanctioned form of property ownership under the law.4 The Southern states wanted strong state government powers over corporations in order to maintain slavery with minimal interference from abolitionists in the North. But, Jacksonian era populists used local state power to attack privileges and corrupt deals allowing elites to aggregate even more wealth. Non-slave corporations sought to come under federal protection rather than subject themselves to the laws of populist leaning states, arguing that unpredictability among state legislatures and different treatment across state lines made it difficult to attract financing or grow businesses across regions.

Ultimately, the status of free blacks came to be at the center of this controversy: “[i]f corporations had access to the federal courts, then free blacks probably did as well. And if the court protected their rights as it did corporate rights, then the South’s system of racial rule faced a grave threat” (Allen 2006), 43. Conversely, if

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The semi-public status of slaves is exemplified by their inclusion in the Constitution as 3/5 person for purposes of electoral apportionment.
blacks who’d bought themselves or been freed by their masters could cross state lines and enjoy the privileges of federal citizenship, why couldn’t corporations? Yet, corporations making this policy argument in the face of slave-owner power in Congress were certain to lose. This conundrum led Chief Justice Taney’s Supreme Court in 1857 to issue its infamous Dred Scott decision stripping all rights from black Americans, free or not.

Dred Scott ended all hope of gradual elimination of slavery, and it heightened the determination of abolitionists to end slavery by any means necessary—including armed insurrection. This latter threat was a key source of northern business irritation with slavery. Slavery was politically and militarily unstable, as well as legally unpredictable, and it thereby limited long-term investment and development overall.

Contrary to Wood’s argument that capitalism favors anti-racism, in reality without abolitionist opposition to slavery, and without slave insurrections and escapes, there would likely have been little business opposition to slavery. For that matter, Chief Justice Taney assiduously sought to please both Southern plantation owners and northern industrialists by denying blacks any rights whatsoever—thus securing corporate access to federal protection by separating them legally from black ex-slaves. It was not Northern capitalism, but the opponents of the slave industry that pushed the nation on a more democratic path—via the Civil War.

2. Opportunity Lost: The Civil War Was a Revolutionary War for Human Rights Over Property Rights

The counter-revolution that followed the Civil War has obscured, for many, the broad scope and revolutionary character of the war and Reconstruction. Freeing slaves was a major taking of property at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. It was for Radicals an opportunity to re-found the nation on the basis of equality, and to merge the two proletariats. The North passed the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to alter the constitutional framework and not only ensure blacks’ freedom, but to entitle all workers to advance economically and receive just compensation for labor. (Goluboff 2007), 158. Yet Union troops and Reconstruction officials encountered deep opposition confronting the racial attitudes of white southern workers.
Discussing efforts of the Freedman’s Bureau to uphold the rights of freed slaves, the head of the Mississippi Freedman’s Bureau, Col. Samuel Thomas, wrote that white opinion could not, “conceive of the negro having any rights at all…to take property away from a negro they do not deem robbery….They still have the feeling that the black people at large belong to the whites at large.” (Foner 1988), p. 149. Ingrained racist culture, even more than elite economic interests, stood in the way of revolutionary change. Within weeks of Lincoln’s assassination by a Confederate, the newly-elevated President Johnson, a former slave-owner, granted amnesty to most Confederates, restored most confiscated lands to whites, and replaced Reconstruction officials wanting to redistribute land to blacks with officials supporting coercive forms of contract labor for former slaves.

These counter-revolutionary moves were accompanied by the rise of death squads directed against democratic activists in the South, which effectively stifled radical egalitarian transformation before it could take hold. With the ascent of Southern power to Congress, “about 94 percent of the federal election regulatory code built up after the Civil War would be repealed.” (King and Smith 2011), p. 59. While slavery was not directly reinstated, property ownership was denied to freed slaves. This re-created the basic two-proletariat structure, but given that some whites were also poor and property-less and potentially inclined to unite with blacks, new rigid forms of racial segregation were instituted that sharply heightened racial distinctions between the two proletariats.

Government property distribution reinforced racial hierarchy. Large land giveaways after the war, called ‘homesteading,’ increased property ownership among whites while land distribution for blacks was blocked. In March 1865, at the close of the war, Congress passed legislation stating that to “every male citizen, whether refugee or freedman, there shall be assigned not more than forty acres of land.” Congress acknowledged at the time that this policy was essential to establishing equality; slaves could not actually be “free” without property and resources. Instead they would be forced back into another kind of slave-like condition. Yet the legislation was never put into effect, undermining the Civil War victory. It left ex-slaves landless and penniless, forcing them to work as debt farmers and low-wage laborers barely distinguishable from their former enslaved condition.
Prior to the counter revolution, in 1862, President Abraham Lincoln had signed the Homestead Act, which opened government-owned land to small family farmers ("homesteaders"). The act gave any citizen who was the head of a family 160 acres for five years after which they had to pay only $18.00. Farmers could also opt to buy the 160 acres after only 6 months for $1.25 an acre. Blacks could not take advantage of the virtual land giveaways before 1866, because they were not citizens. After 1866, being penniless ex-slaves, very few had the ability to move and build a house as the program required. By 1900, settlers had obtained 80 million acres of land through the Homestead Act. To make way for homesteaders, the federal government forced Native American tribes into reservations.

The system that emerged to keep blacks working on former plantations was sharecropping--a form of debt-internment. Since few blacks had money or access to land after slavery, most were forced to work for former slave-owners. Landowners would advance them credit to buy supplies, and then pay them for bringing in the crop. However, the payment for the crop typically did not cover the cost of supplies, and sharecroppers found themselves bound to the land by debt to the landowner or local merchant. "Debt operated in the South as a way to buttress the economic and legal regime of Jim Crow. Blacks who resisted were often lynched or brutally attacked." (Dawson, 2015 #2043)

3. Corporate Power And Counter-Revolution After the Civil War

The basic structures of modern capitalism were constructed on the basis of the suppression of democratic advancements post- Civil War. As industry grew, the fight over property focused not only on land but also on wages and control of corporations. In a shocking misreading of the 14th amendment, a conservative Supreme Court decided without argument in the 1886 Santa Clara decision that corporations were legal persons entitled to the same protections as citizens. Eleven years later, in a case concerning the right of state governments to regulate a railroad company, the Court wrote, “corporations are persons within the provisions of the fourteenth amendment,” and, “a state has no more power to deny to corporations the equal protection of the law than it has to individual citizens.” The ruling was a
direct blow to democratic control of corporations and led directly to the era of robber barons and monopolies. Under the new philosophy of the *Santa Clara* Court, redistributive economic justice was not judicially enforceable; it could only be pursued through democratic politics. As historian Gerald Magliocca observed, “liberty of contract was invented to give voice to renewed interest in protecting property rights, and that idea was grafted onto the Fourteenth Amendment because no other part of the Constitution could bear it.” (Magliocca, 2011 #2034), p. 150.

This new view of corporations emerged during the Court’s simultaneous reasoning that racial inequality perpetrated by “private” parties, including businesses, was not prohibited by the 14th amendment; the Court maintained the 14th Amendment was only intended to protect blacks from state *governments*. The reading was both patently false and tragically ironic: the Court used a Civil War statute intended to protect former slaves to instead shield corporations from democratic accountability; it then supported extensive private and governmental racial segregation, the latter through it’s farcical “separate but equal” doctrine essentially to re-enslave blacks.

It was no accident that the Court issued it’s infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision endorsing racial segregation on the heels of the Populist Movement. The Populist Movement, mainly of poor whites but reaching out to Southern African Americans – thereby threatening to unite the two proletariats -- endangered corporate power and property. The movement already had proven it’s capacity to capture state and local offices when one of it’s key leaders, William Jennings Bryant, won the Democratic nomination for President in 1896. The reaction was swift: many states quickly established restrictions on voting, including literacy tests, grandfather clauses, poll taxes, and other measures that not only kept blacks, but also large numbers of poor whites from the polls as well.

Racial segregation was an even more powerful structural means of dividing the emerging movement. Physical separation by race became far more important for whites’ identity-formation than economic status. Segregation bred racial enmity, and undermined radical inter-racial movements time and again. Thurgood Marshall and other NAACP lawyers made just this point before the Supreme Court in the
famous 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case that eliminated, at least formally, the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine:

"Plessy v. Ferguson chilled the development in the South of opinion conducive to the acceptance of Negroes on the basis of equality because those of the white South desiring to afford Negroes the equalitarian status which the Civil War Amendments had hoped to achieve were barred by state law from acting in accordance with their beliefs. In this connection, it is significant that the Populist movement flourished for a short period during the 1890’s and threatened to take over political control of the South through a coalition of the poor Negro and poor white farmers. This movement was completely smashed and since Plessy v. Ferguson no similar phenomenon has taken hold." (Magliocca, 2011 #2034), p. 97.

A major ideological shift accompanied the counter-revolution: the abolitionist-democratic view that the right to self-governance through a democratic process is the most basic of all rights, was replaced by the conservative liberal view that private property rights trumped democracy and those who lacked property were inferior human beings. By the turn of the 20th century, the dominant American cultural narrative framed “self-made men” such as Carnegie and Hilton as the drivers of progress. The aspiration for government was for efficiency, making it much like industry. Poverty was not a reflection of political oppression, but of personal failings. Fairness was a matter of procedure, not substance. The best place for women was in the home, not agitating for rights.

Labor unions embraced this new philosophy. (Norton 1986), p. 55. White labor unions declared their distinction from the colored proletariat, “[b]y 1905 AFL president Samuel Gompers portrayed trade unions as agents of ‘Caucasian civilization’ and warned that ‘if the colored man continues to lend himself to the work of tearing down what the white man has built up, a race hatred far worse than any ever known will result” (Nelson 2001), xxxii. “The new systems justified in terms of these far-ranging racial doctrines included not only anti-black measures but similar laws and practices aimed at Mexicans in the Southwest, Asians in California, and Native Americans in many western states. They also supported the racially justified imperial conquest and governance of Filipinos, Puerto Ricans, and Pacific Islanders, and eventually the systems of race-based immigration quotas
enacted in the 1920s.” (King and Smith 2011), p. 66. In the enactment of each of these measures, white labor was at the forefront.


Racial exclusion weakened white labor. Witnessing the rise of corporate elites and increasing attacks on labor in 1924, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) strongly urged, “that black and white labor get together... [or] organized labor in this country is threatened with irreparable loss.” (Bois 1995), p. 537. The NAACP was directly on target. In 1929, the rise of corporate power led to economic ruin for millions of workers and farmers. In response, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) aggressively organized mass industrial unions. The CIO recruited blacks in the hundreds of thousands. Competition with the old (almost all-white and segregated) AFL unions forced the CIO to organize and grow rapidly, but the more it recruited white workers the more difficult it was to forge a progressive program—due to white workers’ resentment of black “invasion” of their neighborhoods and factories in cities like Detroit and Chicago. (Sugrue, 1995 #1288)

Labor organizing at this time was physically dangerous and legally hamstrung; unions desperately sought federal legal recognition of the right to organize and protection from hostile police and hired goons. Despite a US president sympathetic to labor, the South still controlled key committees in Congress; dealmaking was the only path forward. African Americans within and outside of the labor movement made two demands of their labor allies: push the President and Congress to make lynching a federal crime, and bar racial segregation in their ranks and include black workers in labor protections.

The 1935 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) had provided federal protection for labors’ right to organize into unions and to bargain collectively, facilitating a large increase in union membership—from 3.7 million in 1935 to nearly 10.5 million in 1941. (Goluboff 2007) p. 28. But the legislation that awarded labor this victory, at the insistence of Southern Congressional leaders, excluded agricultural
workers and domestic workers -- most black labor, and much of Latino labor. The legislation remained mute on segregation, and dropped the lynching issue entirely. Labor again rejected an opportunity to unify the two proletariats in favor of a racialized deal with Southern Dixiecrats. Mirroring corporations’ abuse of the 14th amendment in 1896, labor used Civil War era civil rights statutes to defend white workers while excluding black and Latino labor from those protections: “Thus, the vulnerable workers who were excluded from the promise of liberty during the New Deal were precisely those workers whom that promise of liberty was supposed to protect.” (Zeitlow, #2041), p. 1706.

Black labor leader A. Philip Randolph continued the NAACP’s earlier push for a unified labor/civil rights agenda—one that could merge the two proletariats. The NAACP’s program emphasized the right to work for all, and comprehensive social welfare. (Goluboff 2007), p. 109. Echoing Du Bois, Randolph accurately predicted that the ongoing split between the two proletariats would undermine CIO gains.

In 1946, Republicans gained control of Congress. They combined with Southern Democrats to pass the Taft-Hartley amendments to the NLRA, severely weakening labor protections. The amendment restricted strikes and boycotts, excluded Communist-led and other radical unions from NLRA protections -- leading eventually close to a million workers being expelled from labor unions -- and it enabled state “open-shop” laws.

The impact of Taft-Hartley and the failure of their Southern organizing caused the CIO to merge with the more conservative AFL labor federation in 1955. Over black protest, the issue of racial segregation in unions was tabled during the convention ratifying the merger. Yet, labors’ refusal to support civil rights had greater implications. It allowed Southern conservatives to steer the post-war agenda: the launch of the Cold War; construction of the Marshall Plan; suppression of anti-colonial movements from the Congo to Viet Nam; and the creation of a new white “middle class” fed by the GI Bill and publicly financed infrastructure jobs for whites that segregated metropolitan geographies and built black ghettos. The Federal housing programs that enabled working class whites’ movement into racially segregated suburbs later translated into equity in their homes that drove a
spectacular racial divide in family wealth that persists to this day. (Oliver, 1995 #104) These policies led directly to the Civil Rights and black power movements that erupted in the late 1950s.

The 1960s Black Movements

The 1960s civil rights movement continued efforts to eliminate the two-proletariat structure in favor of a racially inclusive social welfare democracy. (Hamilton, 1997 #1200) In 1961, Martin L. King, Jr. addressed the national convention of the AFL-CIO, demanding an end to racially segregated unions and appealing for a single movement: “Together we can bring about the day when there will be no separate identification of Negroes and labor... A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed. . .” (King 1986) Four years later, addressing the Illinois AFL-CIO, King noted that labor had lost political influence, and he warned once again that, “Where there are millions of poor, organized labor cannot really be secure.”

By ‘civil rights’ the black movement meant to address the totality of conditions faced by the colored proletariat: they were exploited on the job or unemployed; they were not free to vote or live where they pleased; and they were daily humiliated in public life. Black leaders viewed labor unionism as part of a broader battle for basic human rights. Randolph and King argued that black workers were especially important to the labor movement precisely because they did not limit the labor movement to wages and contracts, the usual fare of white labor’s narrow business unionism. Instead, the presence of black workers pushed the labor movement to stand for a higher moral purpose—that of dignity and equality for all people in all aspects of life. (Martin Luther King 2011, 1965), p. 115-117. In their view, winning on economic issues entailed uniting workers in an anti-racist movement to overturn the consciously constructed historic racial hierarchy between the two proletariats.

Echoing this view in 1968, Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey secured the Democratic nomination for President. Humphrey called for a domestic Marshall Plan to rebuild inner cities and create jobs for unemployed urban minorities. White labor unions were mostly antagonistic to his program: “polls revealed that for the first
time in more than thirty years organized labor was failing to give a majority of its support to the Democratic presidential candidate.” (Thurber, 1999 #2035), p. 213. George Wallace, running for President on the American Independent Party line, attacked Humphrey and stressed “law and order” and racial segregation as campaign themes. "Union backing for Wallace, columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak reported, was burgeoning into a 'full fledged political revolution.'” (Thurber, 1999 #2035), p. 214. Wallace won an estimated 37 percent of the labor vote, more than enough to account for Humphrey’s loss to Nixon by less than a single percentage point. This was a decisive turning point and the beginning of the end of “democratic-abolitionists” second major effort since slavery to reconstruct capitalist democracy. Nixon was quick to take note, adopting Wallace’s law and order theme and constructing his own “southern strategy” to win over white workers by pledging to hold the line on Civil Rights gains. Jimmy Carter, Reagan and Bush, and later, Bill Clinton, all built on Nixon’s example to varying degrees. (McAdam, 2014 #1975)

5. The Rise of Neo-liberalism in the US

With black insurgency precluding formal legal segregation, President Nixon began to attack the federal government itself for implementing racial integration programs. Nixon maintained he was thwarted by lawyers (the Supreme Court) and bureaucrats (federal programs) in his efforts to help what he called the “silent majority” (the white working class). Using thinly veiled racist appeals, Ronald Reagan went so far as to attack the social welfare state itself, stating in his first inaugural address that, “government is the problem.” If legal segregation could no longer be upheld, the solution would be to privatize social programs such as public education, or attempt to eliminate social programs altogether.

The “secure” alignment between government elites and white labor unions broke by the late 1970s. With the black movement repressed and subdued in the mid-1970s, and poor whites firmly aligned politically against blacks, big capital found little need for making concessions to white labor. Douglas Fraser, President of the United Auto Workers, in resigning from President Carter’s Labor-Management
group in 1978, wrote: “I believe leaders of the business community. . . . have chosen to wage a one-sided class war: . . . they try to destroy us and ruin the lives of the people I represent.” (Zinn and Arnove 2009), p. 530-533. Fraser was describing a re-alignment: government leaders of both parties had aligned with large corporations against both white labor unions and people of color. The racial police state was strengthened, and some poor whites found employment overseeing blacks in prisons or policing the streets in black communities.

Yet as the social welfare state came under attack, far more poor whites than blacks lost welfare state benefits. Instead of quality public education, affordable higher education, and steadily rising wages, poor whites were offered 401K self-managed retirement fund investment opportunities tied directly to Wall St. performance, and college and credit card debt. If Wall St. crashed when they retired, as happened to many in 2008, they were simply out of luck. Those unable to afford adequate healthcare who had home equity were encouraged to use up the equity and take on more debt to pay off their bills.

Though few poor whites made the connection between race and their declining standard of living, their worsening condition was directly related to labor’s repeated rejection of black entreaties to merge the two proletariats. The rise of financial capital, decline of unions, and weakening of government support programs had everything to do with Republicans’ ability to take advantage of popular white resistance to racial integration, which in turn enabled corporations to block progressive property redistribution. Neo-liberalism arose in a period of domestic reaction and backlash to civil rights advocacy in the same way that conservative liberalism ascended in 1896.

Opposed to neo-liberalism in the 1970s, and largely forgotten, was a counter-movement spearheaded by black labor leaders, the Congressional Black Caucus, progressive white social democratic congressional leaders such as Hubert Humphreys, and parts of the AFL-CIO leadership. The counter movement was for full employment, a central black demand since the 1930s. Many black labor leaders felt that affirmative action, while needed in the short term, was too narrow to build the kind of broad coalition needed to beat neo-liberal conservatism. Senator Hubert
Humphrey co-sponsored a full employment bill with a social-democratic black Congressman from California, Augustus Hawkins. During debates leading up to the bill, some black Congressmen pressed for language enabling citizens to sue the government for a job. AFL-CIO leaders killed the right to sue measure and opposed many of the stronger proposals, such as including youth among the protected unemployed, as had been the case in the 1960s, worrying that full employment might fill unions with black and brown workers who would not vote them back into union office. (Weir 1992)

The biggest problem, however, was that the AFL-CIO also opposed wage and price controls, a more European style of solidarity wages across the workforce, arguing that wage controls would limit the ability of individual unions to bargain for wage increases. In essence, this position sought to maintain wage hierarchies within labor. Particularly damaging was the appearance before Congress of Humphrey’s former ally and Johnson’s former budget director Charles Schultze, who testified in 1976 that, “The stumbling block to low unemployment is inflation; the supporter of a full employment policy must of necessity become a searcher for ways to reduce the inflation that accompanies full employment,” (Cowie 2010), p. 275.

Humphrey called Schultze’s testimony a “stab in the back” from the liberal establishment—which included AFL-CIO leadership. Humphrey added: “If the greatest free nation in the history of mankind has to get down on its knees in fear of something as abstract and as arbitrary as these so-called ‘free market forces,’ well, then we’re through. . . We might just as well haul down the flag, lock up the Capital, go home and admit that we don’t have the courage or the imagination to govern ourselves” (Cowie 2010), p. 278. Via this vital point, Humphrey, by no means a radical, was nonetheless asserting the primacy of self-governing democracy over so-called economic “laws.”

Assuming inflation would inevitably rise with full employment also assumed that government could not convince workers to constrain wage demands, or convince businesses to limit prices, because in the end everyone is a self-interested economic actor less invested in maintaining democracy and fostering equality than maximizing personal gain (as if this is possible without consideration of others).
Humphrey was clear, echoing Polanyi, that Schultze’s views, far from describing natural law or science, was merely one possible position in a political and ideological battle over democratic control of the economy. Moreover, the anti-inflation argument was tinged with racial prejudice—that the non-white poor would lack discipline and make unsustainable demands on the system.

Out of the 2008 disaster wrought by the ascent of unregulated finance and corporate-dominated policies, Barack Obama emerged. Obama’s election and re-election signaled the numerical rise of the first proletariat, workers of color. But, opposition from white workers -- he won only 43 percent of the white vote- limited his presidency. Obama was able to pass a weakened version of healthcare reform over strong Republican opposition, but little else. He was unable to unite white workers and workers of color despite repeated efforts. During the Democratic Party primaries in early 2016, Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton had the same problem as Obama. To cast the deep and enduring racial division among workers as a mere chimera, or capitalist ideological trick, as does Wood and many on the Left, does little to explain more than one hundred years of persistent racial conflict among white workers and workers of color. The conflict has intensified during the general election, with Republican nominee Donald Trump having considerable success appealing directly to white workers’ racial prejudices.

**Conclusion**

Very recently the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) spearheaded a broad coalition of non-labor groups including Black Lives Matter and LGBTU groups to support a rise in the minimum wage to $15.00/hour through legislative action in California, New York, and several other locations. The campaign, that affects millions of workers, did not start off with this broad legislative approach. It

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for an account of Obama White House efforts to integrate the construction building trades.
began as a traditional labor campaign to win collective bargaining contracts from fast food employers such as McDonalds.

Notably, the original narrow business unionism (collective bargaining with single employers) approach is precisely what Randolph and King opposed. Under criticism from worker leaders of color, the fast food campaign was transformed into the broader ‘Fight for $15,’ with a focus on the dignity of all people, unionized or not. Police brutality, gay rights, school inequality, and other issues concerning dignity and social recognition were highlighted under the same banner of ‘Fight for $15.’ The shift to a civil rights/human rights frame for labor advocacy had a deliberate goal of uniting the historically divided two proletariats by emphasizing the dignity and worth of all people. It’s emergence may represent the emergence of a third attempt at reconstructing capitalist democracy in the U.S..

These campaigns are not directed only by unions. Rather than rely on limited membership labor organizations, open access coalitions provided a broader base for the movement. Their guiding ideology has not been worker self-interest but awareness and inclusion of the Other—especially the colored and female poor. Rather than considering incremental material gains, such as wage hikes, to be the principal incentive for participation, the movement has pressed for critical independent thinking and social awareness and relationship-building among workers across race as a key driver for change. Another facet of this changing perspective is recognition that the colored proletariat is global. Inclusion in the Fight for $15 of so-called “undocumented” immigrant workers has been a major turnaround for American labor. Participants in the emerging movement are beginning to recognize that at the bottom of the property structure is the colored global proletariat, and that challenging property from below necessitates their recognition and inclusion. This understanding could portend a great power shift in America.
References


