

Anti-racism Is Not About Looking Within Oneself

By Ragnar V. Røed. Originally published June 15, 2020.

In the midst of the justified popular struggles against the racist police murder of George Floyd, there are also a number of ongoing ideological-political struggles. The people's struggle is not only being carried out on the streets, but also politically, in the debate regarding how the struggle will be waged, and not least how it can be won.

As usual in bourgeois society, the bourgeois narrative is the one that dominates. And the upper and middle classes write history. They have free reign in the media to deal their "blows". Where the proletarian masses wage their struggle with their own bodies, with which they defy police curfews and struggle on the streets, the debate in the media takes a less menacing direction.

Where the masses wish to take the fight out to the streets, the middle class' navel-gazing "we must look within ourselves" argument is steadily repeated in the media. From many, this is well-meaning. And some white middle-class people hang their heads to show what "good allies" they are, with expressions like "I will never be able to understand, but I stand by you". The problem is that racism has never been about you, you who are white, middle class, and an activist. The violent oppression of black people has never been about a lack of introspection, i.e. lack of self-examination. When middle-class activists, regardless of skin colour, believe that the struggle is about culture, that it is a struggle primarily about prejudices and perceptions, they turn the world on its

head.

A Clarification on Anti-racism and Ideological Struggle

First, a clarification: in order to build a political movement, one must build an ideological opinion. In this way, the ideological – and cultural – struggle is incredibly important. Tearing down racist statues is a genuinely good cultural struggle that mobilizes the masses, sharpens the contradictions, and creates meaningful propaganda. The point is therefore not that struggling on the matter of culture and symbols and about peoples' perceptions is not important, or that doing so is incorrect. The point I wish to arrive at is that this alone, in and of itself, will never end racism.

This clarification is important, because there are those who call themselves Marxists and leftists who condemn a number of important struggles with the mechanical position that “class alone” is important, and that the only form of genuine class struggle is economic struggle, like wage struggles, strikes, and demands for welfare standards. There are also social patriots and chauvinists who, under a false red flag, wage a struggle against anti-racism, feminism, and against the demands of queer and trans people. Such people situate themselves within a chauvinistic tradition on the European left-wing, a left-wing where labour aristocrats have joined alliances with imperialism, defended colonialism, and who have themselves contributed to racism.

In 1920, The Communist International wrote against the social democrats in the Second International that The Communist International would once and for all break with the tradition of the Second International where only those with white skin

could be found, and that the goal of communists was the liberation of all people in the entire world. Even Marxism's founder wrote much about colonial liberation struggles, against slavery, and against chauvinistic oppression.

Today, real communists fight together with the masses on the streets to tear down statues of racist bourgeois leaders and slave owners. This clarification is important because while we see limitations and criticize petit-bourgeois positions, we know that victory can only be won through struggle and that a particular struggle is required against racism and chauvinism.

Racism is a Modern Legitimization of Colonialism and Imperialism

Racism has its roots in society's base. It grew forth from colonialism, and to a much larger degree from imperialism (in the 20th century). The biological racism that we recognize both from Hitler's race laws and from the Norwegian state's eugenics and forced sterilization campaigns of Tatars is an incredibly modern story. A phenomenon that did not exist 500 or 1000 years ago. When the Roman Empire expanded across the Mediterranean, there was no racism in the empire, neither on the basis of skin colour nor place of origin. The Romans bore no delusions about whites being more worthy or able to rule than blacks. And mighty Rome's competitor in Carthage (today's Tunisia) on the other side of the Mediterranean had African leaders and military generals.

A number of racists, in relations to slavery, make a big deal about the fact that slavery originally did not have anything to do with skin colour. In the first place, they are beating a dead horse, since it is widely known that slavery was a

precursor to feudalism all over the world, even in Norway, where there was a large number of slaves in the Norwegian estates in the early Middle Ages. Second, they ignore the fact that for the last 400 years, slavery organized by European powers, particularly in the Americas (both North and South!), has been almost exclusively reserved for American Indigenous people and Africans. The starting point here is of course not the fact that wealthy Europeans took slaves and used them because they had one or another skin colour. There was a much more cynical motive that lay at base: the accumulation of wealth.

Eventually, as the early modern form of slavery was struggled against, first and foremost through the slaves' own heroic struggles and resistance, as in the French colony of Haiti, the European states did not, in contrast, become any less racist. In fact, it was first in our modern epoch that the pseudo-scientific biological racism saw the light of day! Where one had earlier used the fact that Africans were traditionally not Christian to legitimize using them as slaves for Christian Europeans (a clear cut pretext to profit off of them, of course), modern biology was misused and twisted to serve eugenicist aims and myths about skull shapes, and different parts of humanity's inherited feelings and mental capacities. The term "human race" itself comes from this pseudo-scientific "science", which divides the human species into "races" in a completely superficial manner. This was the modern legitimization of apartheid in South Africa and in the southern states of the US, the very same used by Hitler's genocide, as well as a number of Norwegian governments' attacks against the Sámi and Romani peoples.

Today, racism persists and it does not primarily do so on the basis of prejudices or ignorance, but on the basis of imperialism. Imperialism, capitalism's highest stage, is the epoch that capitalism entered into the 20th century and is characterized in particular by the fact that the world is

divided among a group of imperialist countries (primarily the US, as well as European great powers like England, Germany, France, and Russia) which exploit, oppress, plunder, and take advantage of the overwhelming majority of the world's countries and peoples: in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Racism legitimizes this plundering with biological race explanations that claim that people in these places are lazier or stupider. Today, cultural explanatory models are becoming more and more prevalent. It is no longer genes, but rather culture, religion and lack of self-cultivation (education) that is viewed as the cause of the state of the world as it is, that some countries are "rich" and other countries are "poor".

Racism and Imperialism – It's About Property and Class

The connection between wealth and poverty disappears in this explanatory model. Marxism reveals that the source of wealth is poverty. But in bourgeois ideology, there is no such connection, for "all can become wealthy". It is based on bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ideology, where as long as one wants it enough, or educates oneself enough, or takes risks and has some luck, or breaks with old traditions and religious bonds, they can become rich. In short, they turn the world on its head and believe that oppression grows out of culture, when the reality is that oppressive culture grows out of the oppression that lies at the foundation of society.

The oppression in imperialism, and in every capitalist country, lies within the fact that one class exploits another class. And all forms of social oppression are subordinated to this exploitation in its service, whether it is the oppression of women or chauvinistic/racist oppression on the basis of skin colour, culture, or religious beliefs. Racism serves to

split the people so that the rulers may rule. It serves to legitimize continued poverty for some and wealth for others.

Furthermore, it is the case that in class societies throughout history, hatred for the poor has been dominant, a contempt that is coupled together with the fear of the rebellious oppressed. Rulers and their lackeys have fostered contempt for the impoverished masses, the primitive, dirty, and untrained working masses, who have carried the entirety of society on their backs. Racism is in this sense nothing new; the only thing that has changed is that it is tied closely to specific skin colours, hair types, and similarly superficial physical characteristics and that it is now organized in more advanced ideological systems.

What is the Problem with Turning Reality on its Head?

Yet, one must not mistake ideology with the root. Why not? What would be the problem, if it nonetheless is the case that one must wage ideological and cultural struggle to build a movement? There are a number of problems with this.

A Derailment into Reformism and a Distraction from the Enemy

The first problem is that the focus is thereby directed towards symptoms rather than the root cause of the problems. This is a focus that necessarily leads to reformism. The struggle is thereby reduced to a struggle for reforms, through primarily cultural struggles and symbolic victories. The blows therefore do not strike against property rights or manner in which the base of society is organized, but rather they strike "within ourselves". As if slavery or apartheid historically grew out of the prejudiced hearts of the petit bourgeoisie.

All of it becomes a distraction, where rich, white capitalists continue to control money and power, and they escape the criticism as long as they say the right words and slap rainbow flags or other markers on their company image to show that they are “progressive capitalists”. They can “combat racism” by firing employees who harass people with racism in social media, and then the fact that they exploit tens of thousands of black people to the harshest extent is forgotten.

A Fight Against Militancy

Then, the focus on militancy is weakened. It deepens the reformist line that introspection—going “within oneself”—leads to. Instead of addressing economy, society, institutions, and power, and yes, particularly the political power, the “struggle” has to do with “you”. Particularly, it then has to do with the white middle-class academics, who show their social progressivism in a manner similar to that of the capitalists: by saying the correct words and displaying the correct symbols. To “go within oneself” culminates in, as a rule, precisely these superficial markers. It has more to do with showing oneself off—“look at how good I am” or “look at how bad others are”—and less to do with fighting for political power for the oppressed.

To Become a Part of the System

Third, this identity politics, when it first begins to enter into the political struggle, necessarily becomes a competition about “representation”. Now, it is no longer the white middle-class activist that is in question, but rather that all black people are to be represented by black middle-class people. The peak of this line is Barack Obama, born to a rich family with privilege and high education, who is made into a “representative” for the masses of poor and oppressed black people in the US. Uncompromising struggle against an

oppressive system is turned into a competition for "representation" within the very same system. That is: from proletarian revolution to bourgeois co-optation. From raising the clenched fist to reaching with fingers outstretched for business deals and new acquaintances.

To be Blind to Reality

Finally, it creates a dangerous illusion among the oppressed that it is possible to remove oppression by educating people. It creates an illusion that capitalism's development, despite it all, is moving in the right direction. That ten or twenty or thirty more years of "progressive" capitalists and academics and their probing into the self and its various "discourses" will lead to a world without oppression and racism. An objective look at the last one hundred years of development shows an entirely different picture.

First, one sees that all victories are baptized in blood. The blood of the fighting masses has flowed in streams for every centimetre of progress won. Secondly, one will see that as soon as the masses' rebellions have been tamed, much of the progress has quickly been rolled back. Third, we see that imperialism, this system, still means poverty, hunger, need, and war, and to no diminished degree! There are just as many starving today as there were ten, twenty, thirty, and forty years ago! There are more wars today than there were fifty years ago! And in today's crisis, we see that the masses of people lose their livelihoods to a larger degree than before. All of this hits the already impoverished and most oppressed with the greatest force. In Brazil, this is especially true for indigenous and black people. In the US, it is exactly the same, only to a lesser degree, since the country is a rich imperialist country. In Europe, we see the same tendencies. In a global perspective, both an economic crisis and a viral pandemic come as a tsunami that in particular rolls over the world's poorest, who as a rule are typically not white. But at

the end of the day, this is more of a question of class than it is of skin colour, even though racism is very much real and incredibly relevant.

There exists a mutually exclusive relationship where black people are overrepresented because they are proletarian and more often are proletarian because they are black. The origin of this situation is colonialism and slavery, and it is carried forward by capitalism and imperialism, where the exploitation and oppression of black people are integrated in society's economic and social basis.

In short – the illusion of “looking within oneself” being a solution to the problem is a gigantic bluff and delusion. Racism and chauvinism grow out of societal conditions, from the foundation of society, from economy and production, and all the introspection in the world will never tear capital from the hands of a small class of parasites, of primarily European origin.

Racism Will Not be Abolished Before We Have Smashed Imperialism

And here, we refer back to George Floyd, Eugene Obiora, and the many other victims of the police's brutal attacks. One common characteristic is skin colour, and another common factor that truly weighs heavier is class. It is not the few black CEOs in the US who are tackled onto the asphalt and have their lives smothered out of them; it is poor people, the lumpenproletariat, and workers. When bourgeois politicians point out crime statistics, they skip past the other bulk of statistics, like those that show overrepresentation among the poor and the proletariat. It is primarily the people from the deepest and broadest masses who experience harassment, mistreatment, and violence.

All black people in this system will be able to share their

own experiences with prejudice, bullying, harassment, and assault, but its effects are disproportionate and it affects those who have the least the most. And the brutal and deadly violence is almost always reserved for them. The statistics show, after all, that in the US, Latinos and whites are also affected by police violence, and we have no need to consult the figures to know that our class, the proletariat, and additionally those who are pushed entirely out of production and into criminality, the lumpenproletariat, completely dominate in these numbers. We don't see four police officers piled on top of people like Harvey Weinstein or Jeffrey Epstein when they are arrested. It has to do with skin colour, but it also has to do with the value of what is inside their pockets.

People can search within themselves until they become deaf from hearing their own voices and lose contact with the outside world altogether. The oppressive system will still remain until it is torn apart by political revolution. The only thing that can liquidate the economic and social basis for racism is a proletarian revolution; that is, socialism and unrestricted power to the proletariat and all other oppressed peoples, and further development until classless global communism. As long as capitalist imperialism remains, it will create racism, chauvinism, and discrimination. They must be pulled out by the roots, and these roots cannot be found within our own hearts or brains, nor even in the hearts and brains of racists, but rather deep down within this system, this society, which is overripe to be thrown into the dustbin of history.

It is no coincidence that this system has built monuments and raised statues to honor slave owners, colonial rulers, war profiteers, and despots. But the system will not disappear by tearing down the statues it has built. We must undermine and detonate the very pedestal they stand upon.

This can only be done by creating a revolutionary movement;

that is, by constituting and developing a communist party, a people's army, and a united revolutionary front, and by initiating a people's war as a part of the proletarian world revolution under the banner of Maoism.