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## Race, Gender, and Class Politics in the US Primaries

By Vicente Navarro  
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*This is the text of a speech given by Vicente Navarro to the Hopkins Student Association on January 26, 2016. Professor Navarro teaches public and social policy at the Johns Hopkins University. He was senior advisor to Jesse Jackson, Sr., in his 1984 and 1988 Democratic Party primaries, and in 1993 he was a member of the White House Health Care Task Force. He currently advises the leadership of Podemos in Spain.*

We are witnessing a major development in the United States as a consequence of the enormous financial, economic, and political crises that have been hurting this country. Wages, the most important variable in determining the standard of living of the popular classes, have been declining for quite some time, as a consequence of the deterioration of the working conditions in the labor market. Good jobs have become very scarce. And the employment sector that has increased the most is for low-paid jobs.

This deterioration, while affecting with special intensity the working class—which, remember, constitutes the majority of the US population—has also affected the middle class, in a process some of us defined some time ago as the “proletarianization of the middle class.” As a consequence, the standard of living of the large majority of the population has been declining, recently reaching its lowest levels in what is known as the “Great Recession.”

**Why have the quality of life and well-being of the popular classes declined?**

The Great Recession, which for large segments of our population was the Great Depression, had been building up for many years. It did not happen suddenly. If you look at income distribution in the US, you can see that while income derived from capital (property that generates income) has increased since the 1980s (as a percentage of all income), income derived from labor has declined. This is the root of the problem we are facing. The income of the first—a minority—has been increasing enormously at the cost of the second—the majority. Let me add that some of us warned that in the growth of these class inequalities, the seeds of the crisis were planted. I am terribly sorry that we were right. Much suffering has occurred that could have been prevented.

But we have to ask ourselves why this happened. And the answer is easy to see, even though the establishment of this country works forty hours a day to hide and obscure the causes of that enormous harm. Look at the data and you will see. It started with President Reagan in the US and with Prime Minister Thatcher in the UK. They started public interventions to weaken the institutions that historically defended the labor, social, and political rights of the working population. Outside the US, these public interventions are known as “neoliberal policies.” They have included labor market reforms (aimed at lowering wages) and reductions of public social expenditures, with the goal of diminishing the already limited US welfare state. These policies, referred to as “austerity policies” in Europe, have caused enormous harm to the popular classes, awakening movements of opposition on both sides of the North Atlantic. In Spain, we have seen a party—Podemos—that did not exist one year ago become a major force in that country. In the UK, we have seen a large movement of protest against the British establishment, which led the uprising of the grassroots of the Labor Party against its leadership, forcing their ouster and electing the most progressive general secretary the British Labour Party has ever had, Mr. Jeremy Corbyn.

We are indeed witnessing a major protest on both sides of the North Atlantic, against the damage created by public policies that systematically favor capital at the cost of labor, causing enormous harm to people’s health, quality of life, and social well-being. The changes in income distribution that I mentioned are a result of those policies. Popular rebellions have started in Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Spain, and Great Britain, among other countries. Now, the rebellions appear in the US. It started with the Occupy Wall Street movement, clearly inspired by the “Indignados movement” in Spain. The political movement of Occupy Wall Street is the pro-Bernie Sanders campaign.

## **Popular Rebellions in the US**

In the US, there has been, for some time, anger and frustration about the limited democracy that exists in representative political institutions. The splendid slogan that the Indignados movement used in Spain, “*no nos representan*” (“they do not represent us”), referring to Spanish democratic institutions, also applies to US representative institutions. In the US, these institutions are widely perceived to be controlled by business interests, of what Occupy Wall Street called the top 1% of the population—that is, very small sectors of the population that derive their income from ownership and management of capital. This used to be called the capitalist class or, in the US, the corporate class. Bernie Sanders calls it the *billionaire class*.

This class holds enormous power in this country that appears in many forms. One is through the privately funded electoral process. In no other country in the Western Hemisphere does the 1% have as much political power as in the US. That class has bought the political process by financing the electoral process. The splendid and inspiring beginning of the US Constitution states that in this country, “We the people decide...” But the power of the billionaire class has changed that sentence, adding an enormous footnote that says, “and the corporate class...” that by its own weight has erased the word “people” from that original sentence. The fact that we, in the US, do not have a national health program that guarantees the basic human right of access to medical care in a time of need is rooted in this reality.

This popular anger and frustration have significantly increased during these years of the Great Recession, which to a large degree was caused by the enormous dominion that financial capital (banks and insurance) have over both branches of the US federal state. And it is this anger toward the political establishment in Washington, DC, that explains what is happening in the Democratic and Republican primaries. The most successful candidates—Donald Trump on the Republican side and Bernie Sanders on the Democrat side—are indicators of this anti-establishment mood of the electorate. Their success has surprised and alarmed the political and media establishments.

### **The Polarization of Political Life**

Trump is, incidentally, the US version of the Le Pen party of France. His movement has characteristics of the ultra-right wing anti-immigrant chauvinist movements (with clear tones of Nazism) that are appearing throughout Europe. It has strong nationalism, with imperialist overtones, led by a man presented as almost superhuman, who uses his success in real estate business (one of the more corrupt speculative sectors of the US economy) as proof of his ability to run the country. Trump indeed represents what a “successful entrepreneur” is supposed to be in the US. Another characteristic of Trump’s candidacy is his authoritarianism and insensitivity to democracy. And, like the French Le Pen party, he claims to have a pro-worker program. Let’s remember that the Nazis and the Fascists called themselves *national-socialists*. Trump strongly defends Medicare and Social Security in the US. He explicitly runs against the political-media establishments and frequently attacks corporate America, including its media. He is also running against the Republican Party establishment and its media outlets, including Fox. His objective is to attain the vote of the angry, white working class, and the polls show that he is successful. And predict he will continue to be successful.

### **Socialism in the US?**

On the other side of the political spectrum is the socialist Bernie Sanders, who explicitly *calls for a political revolution against the “billionaire class”* (what used to be called the capitalist class), a class that practically controls the major political institutions such as the US Congress and the major media. His program is similar to what used to be the programs of the social-democratic parties, before social democracy stopped being social democracy (as has happened in Europe). It is true that Sanders is not asking for nationalization of the main means of production, but it calls for a significant redistribution of the country’s resources, increasing the income derived from labor by reducing the amount going to capital. It especially speaks of class struggle, redefined in

terms of pitting the majority of the people (what Sanders defines as “middle class and working families”) against the capitalist class, redefined as the “billionaire class.”

The novelty of Bernie Sanders is not only his discourse but also his coherence, matching his discourse with his own biography. He has been fighting for the working class throughout his political life. His speech now is the same as the speech and work he has always practiced. It has, therefore, credibility. It attracts the white working class and the young. The sizes of his audiences are beating records. And it has opened a debate about socialism in America, to a point where, according to recent polls, more Democrats favor socialism than capitalism. He is attracting the white working class and young people, a powerful combination indeed. The exception, however, is limited support from the African American and Latino communities. Why?

### **Why are African American and women’s organizations not supporting the socialist candidate?**

Before answering this question, we have to understand the other candidate, Hillary Clinton, who has the support of the Democratic Party establishment, including the leadership of major organizations in the African American community. The same is occurring, incidentally, with the majority of feminist organizations (like NOW) who support Hilary Clinton, hoping to see, for the first time in history, a woman as president of the US. The support of these two groups (African Americans and women) could play the determining role in the election primaries, making it possible for Hillary Clinton to win over Bernie Sanders.

African American support for Hillary Clinton is due, in part, to sympathy and support for the Clintons, which is surprising, since President Clinton was the major force behind approval of the welfare (means tested) reforms that diminished federal support for poor people. This affected the most vulnerable of the African American population. Professor Kathryn J. Edin of Hopkins University and H. Luke Shaefer of the University of Michigan, in their book *\$2.00 a Day*, showed how the 1996 welfare reform legislation signed by President Clinton reduced federal support for the poor with a devastating impact among the very poor, imposing lifetime limits in cash assistance and increasing the supply of unskilled labor that benefited employers. Hillary Clinton has not criticized or denounced such reforms. Needless to say, her candidacy in the primaries is significantly different and more progressive than any Republican candidacy, all of them profoundly reactionary. But the point is that, without a doubt, the program of Bernie Sanders would benefit the African American community far more than the program of any other candidate, including Hillary Clinton. The evidence is overwhelming. Why then is the African American community supporting Hillary Clinton?

### **Race and Gender: Power Without Class Power**

A similar situation appears among women. Let me stress that the US has some of the largest feminist organizations in the Western world. I should also add that it has the largest organization for the elderly, the AARP. In spite of this, the US is the country where African Americans, women, and the elderly have fewer political, civil, and social rights. African Americans, women, and the elderly have the least health benefits among their equivalents in other developed

countries. Women, for example, have the least maternity leave in the Western world (5 weeks without pay). The average in the European Union (EU-15) is 9 months with pay. The elderly have the least coverage of their Social Security and Medicare bills. Almost 40 percent of people in terminal conditions worry about how they or their families are going to pay for their medical bills.

The primary reason for this underdevelopment of human rights is the absence of powerful socialist forces and parties, rooted historically in the working class. This reality, however, is rarely mentioned in the US. It is presented as too “ideological” or antiquated. The scientific evidence that supports this observation, however, is overwhelming. *There is no doubt that implementation of Sanders’s proposals would be far more beneficial for the majority of blacks, women, and the elderly than Hillary Clinton’s proposals.* No question Hillary Clinton has the best intentions. But, like President Obama, she is a creature of the establishment and a key part of that establishment. That considerably limits what they think, what they want, and what they will be able to do. The solutions for this country will not come from the establishment. You cannot receive significant money and support from corporate America and then promote policies that will curtail its benefits. This is why the socialist candidate is critical of the private funding of US elections. It is a travesty that corrupts the meaning of democracy. It is most unlikely that the president or candidate who receives money from financial capital (that is, from banks and insurance companies) will support the single-payer position that curtails the benefits of those financial institutions. President Obama and candidate Clinton are an example of this.

### **Why do blacks and women have so few rights in the US?**

In the US, one reason for the enormous weakness of blacks, women, and the elderly is that their movements are not based on class but on primarily or only race, gender, or age. Class is what could unite all of them. But class and class policies are basically repressed in the US. This is an indicator of the enormous power of the corporate class. The dominant class does everything possible to have groups that could potentially rebel against the system divided and separated. It allows race and gender discourse, but not class discourse. Needless to say, African Americans and women are divided by class. The objective of the “billionaire class” is to co-opt African Americans and women into the system so they are closer and more aligned to the dominant class. The fact that so little is spoken about class in the US is because the billionaire class does not want people to speak or think in class terms. The politician who saw this reality best was Jesse Jackson, Sr. (I had the privilege of advising him), when he established the Rainbow Coalition. In 1984 he ran as the voice of the minorities. His slogan, “Our time has come,” said it all. *The New York Times* wrote an extremely supportive editorial that year. Not even Jesse Jackson’s mother would have written such a nice editorial. But in 1988 he presented himself as the voice of the working class. In Baltimore, a working class city par excellence, when he was asked, “How you are going to get the support of the white steelworker?” he replied, “By making him aware he has more in common with the black steel workers by being a worker, than with the boss by being white.” He obtained almost 50 of the Democratic delegates in the Atlanta convention. Never before has the left been so powerful in the US (*The New York Times* incidentally wrote an extremely hostile editorial in 1988).

### **What about the Latinos (also called Hispanics in the US)?**

The reader may have noticed that I, a Hispanic, have not spoken about the Latinos, known also as Hispanics in the US. Yet I have left speaking about Latinos for the end. But last does not mean least. Let me start by making some clarifications. First, while the majority of Hispanics are working class in low-paid sectors, others (primarily those from Cuba) tend to be middle-class exiles from Cuba and Republicans. There are more class differences among Hispanics than among African Americans. This explains their different political behavior. Today, two of the most reactionary Republican candidates are Hispanics, Cruz and Rubio, both originally from Cuba.

But the overwhelming majority of Latinos are indeed working-class individuals from Puerto Rico, Central America, and Mexico. Hispanic people are distinguished by their names (e.g., Navarro) and by their accents, many when they are immigrants, like myself. I was born in Catalonia and Spain, but in the US census category, I am Hispanic (and I am proud of being defined as such). This trait appears even more markedly via my heavy accent (you should know that at Hopkins, in 1968 the students gave me an award for offering the “best course given in a foreign language”). I know what it is to be Hispanic (of the upper middle class, however). But, while I am not insensitive (quite the contrary) to the plight of the majority of Hispanics, my work has focused on class rather than race or ethnicity, fully aware that the best measure to improve the well-being of Latinos and the majority of the working population is to focus on class issues than only on race or ethnic issues.

To do so implies, however, a personal cost. If I had focused on Hispanics primarily, today I might have had (besides a lot of research money) a building named after me. By focusing on class, however, I have had enormous difficulties in doing research on what I wanted to study, because there is little support for researching how to strengthen the working class of the US (including the whites, blacks, yellows, and greens among the population). That is the reality we are living in the US and that you should be aware of. But the new development we are witnessing is that blacks, blues, yellows, greens, and whites may be starting a new movement that could confront the enormous power of the “billionaire class.” The establishment, including the Democratic Party establishment, keeps enforcing what divides people rather than what unites people. And here is where the leadership of major African American organizations, and the feminist movement, with close links to the establishment, are stressing their own cause without realizing they are harming their own constituencies by not linking their cause with the causes of other groups, with class as the strongest link among them. Please notice that I am not saying “emphasizing class rather than race and gender...” but rather “emphasizing class in addition to race and gender...” For all of these groups, emphasizing class-based policies will get more for their constituents than limiting themselves to their own groups. The evidence in Europe is overwhelming.

Let me finish by stressing what should be obvious: women, the elderly, and ethnic and minority groups have more civil, social, and political rights in Western Europe than in the US. The overwhelming scientific evidence that I show in my teaching and in my books shows this reality. The primary reason is that in Europe, class has played a major role in the guidance of political mobilization, much more than in the US. In other words, socialism has been far more powerful in Europe, and incidentally in Canada, than in the US. This is why the US working population has so few human rights. It is very important and urgent that in your work you show the



commonality of class interest that the major components of the popular class in the US have. Let me thus conclude by taking as my point of reference none other than Martin Luther King, Jr., a self-declared socialist, when he said, a few weeks before being assassinated, that “*class struggle is the key struggle in the US.*” As with many of his positions, I also agree with this one. It is your responsibility in that conflict that you, as a scientist, working on improving the health and wellbeing of your people, put yourself at the service of the majority of the population, and not at the service of the minority, the billionaire class, which controls or exercises excessive influence on the political, and increasingly the academic, institutions of this country. You will not get many awards or recognition from the establishment and their institutions. But you will feel the satisfaction of having done what needs to be done—many times at even a large personal cost—to oppose so much exploitation and oppression that exist in the US. I hope you agree.