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Race and Class in Trump's America

By Rob Urie

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Americans don't do political introspection well for a reason. The 'founding' myth poses an improbable starting point before which history was erased and after which it was subsumed by the imposed unity of 'nation.' As Malcolm X put it, "We didn't land on Plymouth Rock, the rock landed on us" for American Blacks in particular, but in other dimensions of social relations as well. 'Freedom' in its Constitutional sense was / is the privilege to impose European property relations on people who were never asked for their consent and whose lives were overwhelmingly diminished and / or destroyed by it.

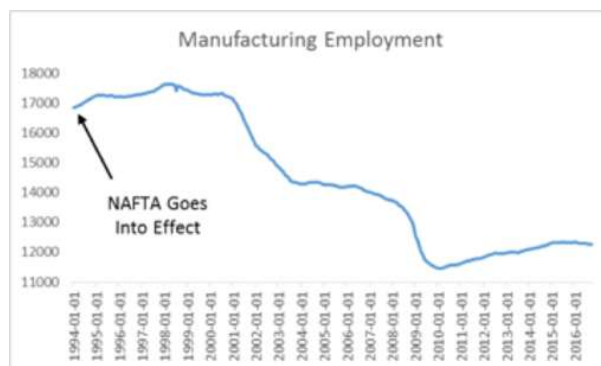
The historical dodge that Malcolm X called to account was the tendency to 'universalize' the dominant culture's history and interests as a means of subsuming contrasting experiences under an umbrella of implied consent. In most meaningful ways the interests of slave 'masters' and slaves were antithetical—slavers took the most by providing the least in return. This historicized formulation of capitalist 'efficiency' found its apologies in the imperial language of 'the White man's burden' and through modern economists' assertions that capital serves us all no matter how much human misery went into its accumulation.



Graph: LFPs— Labor Force Participation rates by race illustrate institutional racism in the broader context of the declining fortunes of American labor. Black Labor Force Participation (employment) has remained persistently lower while rising and falling approximately in tandem with that of White workers through Republican and Democratic administrations. Since 2000 both Black and White employment has declined, with a precipitous drop beginning around 2009. The newly mythologized ‘plight of the White working class’ is better stated as the plight of the working class with an overlay of institutional racism. Source: St. Louis Federal Reserve.

Jump to the present and Malcolm X’s social difference has been more effectively subsumed by dehistoricizing capital than by changed politics. A fey liberal-Left merged Nietzsche’s resentment with identity politics to consign social antagonisms to the realm of psychological quirk. Apparently unconsidered, or perhaps unknown, is that this move joins with the Western economists’ conceit that life is psychic capacity untethered from history and material existence. It also consigns social resolution to changing minds rather than circumstances.

The point has been well- made that if the White working class has a gripe, working class Blacks have reason for righteous anger. Whatever economic catastrophe is hoisted on the White working class, from outsourced jobs to predatory loans leading to predatory foreclosures, from unaffordable ‘private’ health care to corporatized education, started from a worse point for Blacks and ended there as well. However, institutional racism as a factor in labor markets has remained approximately constant since the end of post-War American industrial hegemony. Since then the forces of globalization have recreated a unity of economic interests.



Graph: The globalist restructuring of Western economic relations since the 1970s proceeded from improbable theories tied to the interests of connected industrialists. NAFTA 'freed' American manufacturing workers to find their way to 'better' jobs that never materialized. Meanwhile, the architects of this program built in protections for themselves from the invisible middle finger of heavily engineered 'market' outcomes. Source: St. Louis Federal Reserve.

Institutional racism has existed from slavery to mass incarceration in large measure because it supports economic exploitation. Following the American Civil War institutional inventions like convict leasing, Black Codes, Jim Crow and more recently, mass incarceration, perpetuated the economic taking of slavery through the use of social explanations intended to convey social legitimacy to exploitative practices. Convict leasing was premised on the idea that (strategically defined) criminal acts created a 'debt' to society to be repaid through labor. As with the 'founding' myth, history was erased to pose the act of living, in this case living while Black, as a series of criminal acts. The same is now true of newly immiserated Whites who suddenly find that ordinary acts of living place them on the wrong side of the law.

As an imagined starting point, the founding myth serves as an operational analog to capitalism. Once history is erased, wholly detached theories of social existence become possible. In the founding myth 'we' are all equal in the sense of being citizens. Capitalism is premised in equal opportunity that assumes away embedded history. Both of these premises require 'backward induction'— the creation of anti-historical explanations, to disappear the tie of historical relations to outcomes. The question of how the existence of a Black underclass could possibly not tie to three plus centuries of specific and persistent strategies to create one gets to the absurdity of the conundrum.



Graph: Unbeknownst to most not damaged by an education in economics, unemployment results from a tradeoff between 'leisure,' a/k/a sailing the Mediterranean on one's yacht, and labor, dependent on 'price.' As with mainstream economic explanations of the Great Depression, around and soon after 2009 some fair portion of the American workforce decided to go on vacation. As of a few weeks ago, these fortunate souls were still sipping cocktails between lengthy tours of Europe and the Far East. Who says that economics is 'the queen of the social sciences?' Source: St. Louis Federal Reserve.

The political panic at the election of Donald Trump lies in part in the realization that a doomsday device of sorts has been created in the form of the American corporate-state and partly in his perceived detachment from the 'facts' gleaned through this process of backward induction. The problem is that once the premise that history doesn't matter is taken away the status quo appears as dangerously off-kilter as it is. Liberals are right that Donald Trump is dangerous without signaling that it has ever occurred to them that they are dangerous as well. And for almost all of the same reasons.

The facts by which most people are living are as unlikely to be resolved by Donald Trump as they are by national Democrats. Mr. Trump's strategy of blaming people with little to no power over their own situations for the declining circumstances of others will work until he has his own name on outcomes. His type of scapegoating has been well instantiated, meaning that (1) it has been externally provided and (2) it is almost always tied to intentional misdirection, not clever analysis. It isn't constructive to reduce institutional racism to only economics, but there are structural reasons for why it has served specific class interests. Conversely, rebuilding an inclusive economy would provide a material basis for rendering racism less destructive, whereas changing minds does nothing to resolve material conditions.