

Abolition and the New Society

Race Traitor

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... the primary creative force will be the collective actions of the mass seeking to solve the great social problems which face them in their daily lives. Intellect will play a high role, higher than ever, but it will be the intellectual activities of millions of men, dealing with realities. Intellectuals will be of use to the extent that they recognize the new forces but as a class they will recognize it only when they see and feel the new force. The role that they played between 1200 and today will be over, because the condition of that role, the passive subordinate mass, will be undergoing liquidation in the very action of the mass which will be creating a totally new society, an active integrated humanism. The ideas demanded and the will to achieve them unfold one from the other, and with the consciousness of power ideas, hopes, wishes, long-suppressed, because thought unattainable, but now come into the open—that is the process ... But the great masses become abolitionist now; themselves to wipe away the conditions of their own slavery. These cannot be abolished by anyone else.

C.L.R. James

It seems to me the idea of our civilization, underlying all American life, is that men do not need any guardian. Not only the inevitable, but the best power this side of the ocean, is the unfettered average common sense of the masses. Institutions, as we are accustomed to calling them, are but pasteboard, and intended to be, against the thought of the street.

Wendell Phillips

The time has come to reconsider the original premises of what has come to be known as the new abolitionist project. Thus far, that project (not yet ten years old) has attracted a good deal of media and academic attention, has influenced a number of national discussions on race, has sharpened debates in at least some quarters and has earned a sympathetic hearing among relatively large groups of anti-white supremacist audiences. At the same time, since the initiators of the project had always intended to be guided by the axiom that “the point was to change it,” the project thus far must be considered only a very partial success. Frankly, we had hoped that, by this time, supporters of our project would have been able to establish functioning new abolitionist chapters across the country and that those chapters would have been able to develop effective public projects embodying abolitionist politics. This has not happened.

We have some questions for ourselves and for those we imagine to be more or less critical supporters. Is abolitionism sufficient for the development of a new insurgency — an insurgency that might resume where the insurgency of the 1960s left off? Is it capable of making a decisive contribution to the return of dreams of unqualified human freedom to the popular political imagination?

RACE TRAITOR, characterized by its founding editors as the “journal of the new abolitionism,” was launched in the fall of 1992. What follows reconstructs the political history of the project, evaluates its contribution and potential, and invites others to respond and to join in what might become a new project.

Since the initial publication of the journal, the editors and a relatively small number of associates have attempted to articulate an abolitionist vision for an American revolution. They did so in the context of an observation that almost all on the left who had imagined the necessity or desirability of social revolution in the 1960s and early 1970s had abandoned that goal and they

hoped that a new articulation, in a distinctively American idiom, might contribute to a rebirth of radical activism.

The following are essential elements of the vision:

- race was an historical and social construction and had no biological reality;
- the white “race” was composed of individuals who partook of the advantages of the white skin;
- the advantages of the white skin were universal and substantial and led even the most downtrodden whites to ally themselves with their rulers;
- the white race needed to be abolished if we hoped to make progress in the country’s social life;
- abolitionism was not anti-racism since anti-racism implicitly admitted the existence of races; furthermore, anti-racism often focused on groups like the Nazis and the Klan or conservative politicians as the perpetrators of racism; instead, we argued that race was reproduced by the principal institutions of society—the schools, the labor market, the law, the family and was reinforced by reform programs;
- the existence of the white race required the all but unanimous support of its members;
- the defection of enough “whites” would lead to the collapse of the white race and, by extension, would lead to a profound challenge to the entirety of the established social order;
- most white folks were not deeply nor consciously committed to white supremacy nor were they primarily motivated by prejudice.

In addition, we have:

- reasserted the new abolitionist project’s connection to nineteenth-century abolitionism and to the politics of John Brown;
- expressed an appreciation for the essential contributions made to the American freedom struggle by Afro-Americans;
- associated ourselves with the conviction that the ordinary people of the nation were prepared to rule the society;
- acknowledged the potential and the limitations of cultural “crossovers”—whites who embraced and/or became participants in traditional and contemporary black cultural practices;
- asserted that “a new world, and nothing less, is worth fighting for.” At the same time we never detailed what this new world might be like. This refusal in part reflected our reluctance to be associated with those who saw the new society as a series of ever more ambitious five year plans, in part our realization that many poets and revolutionaries in the past had suggested ways of imagining the future more beautifully than we might, and in part our conviction that the new world would be made by the people who created it and could not be predicted;

- developed a critique of whiteness studies (embodying critiques of post-modernism and multi-culturalism as political positions that reflected despair over the possibility of radical change);
- argued that whiteness was primarily made and re-made by those who wanted to be white and was not foisted upon them by clever rulers;
- argued that various “new” immigrants were in the process of being incorporated as whites, and opposed analyses informed by a view of the U.S. as a “multiracial” society;
- suggested that whiteness was analogous to European social democracy in the sense that it represented an accommodation by some of the exploited to their continuing exploitation at the expense of still others of the exploited;
- recognized that the privileges of whiteness had been eroded during the last twenty-five years and that the erosion had occurred simultaneously with the erosion of social democracy;
- qualified our estimate of the erosion of whiteness with an appreciation of the significance of what might be considered “sedimented” social relations—insofar as they, for example, contributed to continuing inequalities in wealth between white and black while income differentials tended to decline;
- recognized that the turns to the right that had occurred in both the US and Europe were, in part, the result of these erosions of privileges but, unlike some others, we insisted on the importance of distinctions between what might be considered the conservatives and the fascist revolutionaries;
- reaffirmed a conviction that the appeal of the fascists would not likely be countered by a defense of the institutions and, to the chagrin of some, argued that relying on the state to defeat the fascists would only strengthen the state and, ultimately, the fascists themselves;
- welcomed and published the views of those who argued that “white” rebels had perhaps shed some of their whiteness in the course of their rebellion.

A Balance Sheet

Looking back upon this record, we believe that much of what we have said appears sound. Nonetheless, there are some shortcomings:

- We failed to take account of the full significance of what might be considered a world-historical break in 1973 — a break that initiated real development in what had until then appeared to be a permanently undeveloped third world, the de-industrialization of a substantial part of what had previously been the industrial bases of the capitalist world system, the rebuilding of central American cities (concomitant with gentrification) and the incorporation of Afro-Americans into the ruling strata of the United States.

- We too infrequently acknowledged the ways in which we saw ourselves as the inheritors of what might be considered the Johnsonite tradition in American politics. That tradition was begun by C.L.R. James (using the pseudonym of J.R. Johnson) and other colleagues in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Its distinguishing elements can be summarized as follows: [1] a challenge to the existing order will develop as a result of the self-activity of the workers by which they will overcome internal barriers to their development as a potential ruling class (and not as the result of the work of political vanguards); [2] a deep appreciation of America as the country where the development of the productive forces (including both the means of production and the workers) was most advanced; [3] an appreciation of the centrality of the black struggle to the self-realization of the proletariat.
- Although we have said that our aim was not racial harmony but class war, we have not managed to project effectively our view that whiteness was the key “internal barrier” to be overcome in the process of proletarian self-development and that our abolitionism was directly connected to our revolutionary vision. As a result, we have attracted support from individuals who would be upset if they understood the implications of our undertaking. Those individuals include some people who retain deeply held convictions about the unfulfilled promise of the American system and others who oppose all forms of discriminatory thought and behavior (for example, those who oppose “classism” as much as they oppose “racism”).
- We were unprepared for the emergence of the new anti-globalization movement and have found ourselves to be relatively insignificant external commentators on its strengths and weaknesses. We would not want to underestimate this failure. While people in the hundreds, if not thousands, were prepared to confront directly the organized power of the state, we had no role to play. Those activists may be unaware of important political matters but they were the ones taking the risks and there were precious few abolitionists or revolutionaries from other traditions alongside them.
- We were also unprepared for the extent of the erosion of white privilege and the concomitant appearance of blacks in positions of authority within traditionally white-dominated institutions.
- We have not yet fully understood the significance of the erosion of whiteness being done to the working class and not by it. We also did not reconsider whether our “all or nothing” characterization of the white race had stood the test of time. Put it this way: what did it mean if some were no longer white but the white race had not collapsed?
- We have developed only the most tentative of programmatic demands that might serve as the basis for the development of more or less sustained popular campaigns.

Abolitionism and the New Society

We need to reconsider abolitionism one more time. We hope that it is clear that we fully understand that the great mass of the abolitionists consisted of the slaves, the runaways and the free blacks who worked tirelessly in more or less open fashion to destroy slavery. Abolitionism

was the first great moment of black liberation in this country. Then, as later, it served to inspire others not oppressed as blacks to join together with the oppressed in a common struggle for freedom and, more or less simultaneously, to embrace dreams of a new world—a world without fixed gender identities, a world characterized by new understandings of the relationship between the individual and the society, a world infused with a new understanding of the spiritual, and so forth. Consistent with the Johnsonite tradition, we believe this was no accident. In spite of the fact that the Afro-Americans were branded as no other Americans were, they nonetheless became the most fully American and, when they engaged in popular struggle, gave expression to the deepest desires of the larger American population:

The great unsatisfied desire of the American population is for social organization, free association. For common social ends, it is the only means whereby the powerful and self-destroying individualism can find fulfillment. The Americans are the most highly self-organized people on earth. Every city, every suburb, every hamlet, has organizations of some sort, Elks, Shriners, Rotarians, clubs for everything under the sun. But the Negroes are the most highly organized of Americans. Government statistics show that of some 14 million Negroes in the United States, over 10 million are listed as belonging to some organization. Whatever the variety of these organizations every one has openly or implicitly as part of its program the emancipation of the Negro people.

C.L.R. James

On the one hand, the blacks are those who express the desire of all for all and, on the other, they are the people who are often denied everything that is given to everyone else. The contradiction is an excruciating one:

Thus, on all the basic economic and political problems of the day, the Negro, segregated as he is, is an integral part of American life. And it is this contradiction between this fundamental need for complete and total integration demanded by the whole modern development in conflict with the powerful interests which demand and perpetuate segregation that lies the sharpness and the intolerable strains of the whole Negro question.

C.L.R. James

So long as the issue is not confronted directly and completely, things endlessly appear to become better and worse at the same time.

... the fact above all which so demoralizes the modern world, that the greater the efforts made, the more terrible are the new forms in which the old social problems reappear.

C.L.R. James

So, What To Do?

From the beginning we have drawn support from many who, whether they call themselves communists, anarchists, surrealists, or something else, consider themselves revolutionaries. If abolitionism without a vision of a new society is incomplete, the new society without abolitionism is impossible. It follows that we unequivocally welcome the erosion of whiteness no matter what quarter it comes from, and oppose any attempts to respond to the relative weakening of the white position by rearticulating a new whiteness.

We would like to invite those who read this reconsideration and believe that it represents, however imperfectly and incompletely, a useful starting point to get in touch with us, to write in response, to come together in more or less formal meetings to discuss what we have written and to think seriously about the possibility of developing a new political project that preserves and transcends the new abolitionist one. We are especially interested in hearing from those who were active on the streets of Seattle, Washington, Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

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