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978-0-521-29191-0 - Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers

James A. Geschwender

Excerpt

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## 1. Sociology and the dialectics of class and race

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers had a relatively brief history. It first appeared on the Detroit scene in 1968 when the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) was formed. All visible signs of League activity were gone by the spring of 1973. The League during its brief existence organized black workers, conducted demonstrations, held wildcat strikes, participated in union electoral politics, and generally fought to improve the lot of the black worker as part of the process of transforming American society. The struggle led by the League resulted in objective improvements in the areas of safety, working conditions, elevation of blacks into positions of authority in local unions, increases in numbers of black foremen, and in the elevation of level of consciousness on the part of the black worker. This alone would justify a close examination of League history. However, the League experience has a significance that is much greater than simply a half-decade of struggle in Detroit. An examination of the experience of the League may tell us much about the larger dialectic of race in America.

### **The study of race in America**

Much of the study of race in America has suffered from two major defects. It has failed to locate its subject matter in the larger context of the evolving world capitalist system and it has tended to treat blacks as victims without comprehending the dialectical nature of racial exploitation. It is not possible to understand the basis for racial exploitation without an analysis of the world capitalist system. It is only by examining conditions in the world economy that we can understand the necessity for racial exploitation as one element in the social organization of production. However, more is needed than the recognition of the relation between the world political economy and racial exploitation. It is possible to understand the economic basis of racial exploitation without recognizing that it is a fundamental error to see blacks only as vic-

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tims and ignore their active contribution to the shaping of their own destiny. It is this active contribution that is described herein as the “dialectic of race.”

The dialectic could be described roughly as follows. The state of the world capitalist system at any given time sets the parameters for racial exploitation. It determines the nature of the need for labor by amount, type, and probable source. A more or less *organized system of racial exploitation* frequently emerges to fill the need. The exploited group presents a *challenge* to the system through its resistance by any means possible. The exploiting group generally does not wish to give up its advantage so its *response* usually takes the form of an attempt to crush resistance. If the resistance is too strong to be crushed, then the exploiting group may be forced to *retreat* through a partial abandonment of the system of racial exploitation. Retreat does not mean total defeat. The exploiting group retreats because the resistance of the exploited has made maintenance of the existing system too expensive. Retreat usually takes the form of *retrenchment* in a new system of racial exploitation which provides many of the advantages of the old system at lesser cost. This new structure, in turn, stimulates a new collective challenge on the part of the subordinate group against those benefiting from the new systematic exploitation of a racial minority.

The actual operation of the dialectic of race is more complex because it interacts with the dialectic of class. It is not possible to subsume either dialectic within the other. The dialectic of race is neither a subprocess within the dialectic of class nor the larger process subsuming the dialectic of class. Both exist simultaneously and confound the simple-minded analysis of either. A complete analysis of the dialectic of race will not be attempted here but a brief sketch of its broad outlines will be provided to aid the reader in interpreting the meaning and significance of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

The analysis must begin with the rape of Africa and the proletarianization of the African people which, in turn, has to be understood in relation to broader processes. Wallerstein notes that:

If it seems that we deal with the larger system as an expression of capitalism and the smaller systems as expressions of statism . . . we never deny the unity of the concrete historical development. The states do not develop and cannot be understood except within the context of the development of the world-system. The same is true of both social classes and ethnic (national, religious) groupings. They too came into existence within the framework of states and of the world-system, simul-

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taneously and sometimes in contradictory fashions. They are a function of the social organization of the time.<sup>1</sup>

Slavery existed as a mode of organization of production and Africa functioned as a supplier of slaves prior to the introduction of Africans into the American colonies.<sup>2</sup> Slavery resulted from the need for large amounts of unskilled labor for labor-intensive industries. Africa was selected as a supplier of slaves because Europe needed a large population pool that was readily accessible but outside its economic system, so that the negative economic consequences of the removal of manpower would not harm the European economy. Thus the precedent was set, and when American agriculture changed to a mode of agriculture compatible with a labor-intensive system of production it was natural to turn to Africa as a supplier of labor.<sup>3</sup>

Blacks did not respond to slavery with complete docility.<sup>4</sup> Slaves resisted their masters through noncooperation, sabotage, maiming and killing animals, running away, conducting strikes, conducting organized rebellions, and engaging in guerrilla activities. White slaveowners attempted without success to crush all resistance. Ultimately the combination of the activities of slaves and of the Union army (which included many former slaves) combined to destroy the Confederacy and to put an end to slavery.<sup>5</sup>

The end of slavery did not mean an end to the need for cheap unskilled agricultural labor in the South. It was necessary for the dominant classes to come up with a different system of racial exploitation. A system of peonage was developed.<sup>6</sup> It took the form of sharecropping, tenant farming, and debt peonage. This too was resisted. Blacks joined the Sharecroppers Union and the Tenant Farmers Association as well as migrating to cities when jobs became available.<sup>7</sup> Black resistance combined with mechanization of agriculture to bring an end to the system of agricultural peonage.

This occurred at about the same time as expansion of American industry and a consequent growth in need for industrial workers in the United States. Immigrant white labor had satisfied most labor needs during the early period of industrial expansion.<sup>8</sup> However, the immigrant flow ended around the time of World War I while industry was still expanding. A new source of labor was needed and black workers filled the void.<sup>9</sup> Their earliest introduction to industry often had been as strikebreakers but they were now needed as more permanent workers.

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The newly emerging system of racial exploitation was one that operated on a basis of racial discrimination. Blacks were systematically shunted into the harder, least desirable, more dangerous and more poorly paid jobs. The black struggle against this form of exploitation is still continuing. It produces changes and accommodations but it never results in complete victory – that is, in the complete abolition of racial exploitation.

A class dialectic operated simultaneously with the above described racial dialectic, in which racial divisions were exploited to the detriment of white as well as black workers.<sup>10</sup> Slave labor was used in competition with free labor to lower the costs of the latter. After slavery was abolished the presence of large numbers of easily exploited blacks made it possible to keep white tenants and sharecroppers in circumstances little better than those of their black counterparts. Early attempts at industrial organization among white workers were undermined by the use of blacks as strikebreakers. The presence of blacks in lower-status, less desirable jobs inhibited white militancy. Employers could always use the threat of replacing white strikers with black workers. The post–World War II period saw a greater integration of blacks into industry but not on the basis of equality with white workers. The black workers found no greater degree of equality in the unions than in the factories. The civil rights movement brought advances on social issues but no basic change in the economic position of black Americans.

These are the broad developments that set the stage for an examination of the history of The League of Revolutionary Black Workers. As a result of the continued evolution of the American system of production, whites have largely moved out of production jobs in heavy industry to be replaced with black workers. The whites who remain in heavy industry hold down the best jobs and dominate the union structure, while blacks are largely excluded from union decision-making posts as well as being concentrated in the least desirable jobs, departments, and shifts. The activities of the League were simply a manifestation of the continuing black struggle as part of both the racial and class dialectics as they are manifested in heavy industry in northern industrial cities.

#### **Racial stratification theory**

Contemporary American sociology does not have the theoretical or conceptual tools that would enable us adequately to analyze the inter-

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play between racial and class dialectics. Perhaps this inadequacy results from a refusal to recognize that racial stratification is only a special case of social stratification. Stated in overly simplistic terms, social stratification is the unequal distribution of scarce resources associated with the unequal distribution of power. Those classes of persons who influence the distribution of scarce resources utilize their advantage to insure that they and others like themselves receive more than their proportionate share.<sup>11</sup> Members of the ruling class attempt to maintain their power advantage in order to maintain their material advantage. They often manipulate the distribution of scarce resources so as to maximize the number of persons receiving more than their share and thus feeling that they also have a stake in perpetuating the status quo. The unequal distribution of scarce resources may accord with a “divide and conquer” policy in which certain groups receive more than others and consequently develop loyalty to the ruling class despite the fact that it maintains the lion’s share of resources for its own use. The ruling class seizes upon any possible ideological rationalization that may divide the exploited into mutually distrustful groups. The most frequently manipulated lines of cleavage are those between men and women, skilled craftsmen and unskilled laborers, and those who “work with their heads” as opposed to those who “work with their hands.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps historically the most important of such lines of cleavage has been the division of society into racial and ethnic groups, whose hostility has frequently been manipulated to facilitate the perpetuation of existing systems of privilege.<sup>13</sup>

Existing theories of racial stratification are not adequate to the task. In fact there is very little in the way of theoretical work on racial stratification in American sociology. The bulk of all scholarly work that relates in any way to race in America is concerned with the topic of race relations rather than stratification, *per se*. Most of it purports to have relevance for the analysis of racial stratification and, in fact, some does. There are four major models currently used by American sociologists in the analysis of racial stratification. These are the assimilationist model, the white racism or prejudice model, the class model, and the internal colonial or submerged nation model. Each of these will be discussed separately and contrasted to the theoretical approach that dominated the field when first created.

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[More information](#)6 *Sociology and the dialectics of class and race**Robert Ezra Park*

Serious scholarly work dealing with race was initiated by Robert Ezra Park. Park rooted his theory of race relations in an analysis of developments in the world political economy.<sup>14</sup> Situations of race contact, which Park called racial frontiers, were created by European expansionism and exploration in search of markets and raw materials. The earliest frontiers were created by the desire for trade and resulted in competition between groups differing in custom and behavior.<sup>15</sup> Ethnocentrism helps competition to become racially defined.<sup>16</sup> Races are socially defined units. They come into existence when differences are recognized and are interpreted as being biological in origin.<sup>17</sup>

Competition between racially conscious groups may lead to prejudice and the transformation of competition into conflict. Conflict might prove disruptive of commerce; therefore, it tends to be replaced by systems of accommodation.<sup>18</sup> Accommodation is nothing more than institutionalized systems of dominance—subordination (e.g., slavery or caste) that facilitate exploitation by eliminating conflict. Struggle does not return until the system of accommodation begins to break down. Prejudice results from the attempt by members of the subordinate group to rise up out of their assigned station.<sup>19</sup> The system of accommodation may also break down because the oppressed people develop a sense of nationhood, which may lead to the struggle for self-determination and possibly national independence.<sup>20</sup>

Park recognized that racial frontiers may be created by immigration into a host society of large numbers of persons differing from the host population in terms of either race or culture.<sup>21</sup> Park saw no basic difference between frontiers involving racial differences and those involving cultural differences except that race facilitates the identification of individuals in terms of group membership.<sup>22</sup> However, national movements arising in immigrant situations were less likely to seek national independence and more likely to seek room to operate in the larger society free from discrimination.<sup>23</sup>

Park believed that there was a long-term trend toward assimilation and the elimination of racial minorities as such. The development of modern states was such that it appeared probable that minorities would increasingly be absorbed into, and take on the characteristics of, the dominant group.<sup>24</sup> The modern world was perceived to be developing in such a way that more and more nations would be incorporated into a common world political economy in which race, *per se*, would become

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decreasingly important. The emerging world system would not end conflict and exploitation but it would ultimately transform its nature from race to class.<sup>25</sup>

This approach provides an adequate framework for the analysis of racial stratification in America. It provides the basic concepts and perspectives that facilitate examining race as a socially derived concept, emerging out of a world political economy in which one people finds it desirable to exploit others either for reasons of trade, land, or labor needs, and in which racism and prejudice emerge as rationalizations for such exploitation. Prejudice is explained as the result of competition over status as accommodation systems break down. Many of Park's students continued this initial approach but, over time, the field of American sociology drifted to less meaningful perspectives on race. The most popular of these is embodied in the assimilationist school.

*The assimilationist school*

The assimilationist perspective dominates contemporary American sociology. There are several varieties but they share certain central propositions. All versions perceive race as relatively unimportant. Blacks are seen as being in essentially the same position as all other minorities. Each entered American society in a disadvantaged position. Each lacked the knowledge of American culture, the skills and the competencies that would enable them to compete. It is assumed that a certain amount of assimilation took place during slavery but that the process had not progressed sufficiently by abolition to enable blacks to move into American society on a basis of equality.

The traditional assimilationist perspective assumes that all minorities, over time, learn the dominant cultural perspectives and become integrated into American society. It was not assumed that minorities would become identical to the dominant group but that they would become a fully accepted part of a smoothly functioning social system. Most social scientists expected minorities to vary in their rate of assimilation as a consequence of variations in the extent of majority group resistance. Members of the majority group were expected to develop prejudice in response to various features of the minority group. Higher levels of hostility would be generated against groups that were racially or culturally different from the majority. Racial differences were thought to produce the more intense response. Majority group members were also expected

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to perceive large concentrations of minority group members as a threat. Each of these factors was expected to stimulate majority group prejudice leading to majority group resistance, retarding, but not entirely halting, the rate of minority group assimilation. All minorities were expected to become acculturated eventually and to develop the skills and competencies necessary for effective competition in American society. This would lead to a reduction in majority group prejudice and eventual assimilation of the minority into American society on a basis of total equality.

Oscar Handlin accepted most elements of this model but he deviated in one respect.<sup>26</sup> He argued that blacks came to New York City and faced a situation similar to that faced by all earlier immigrant groups but differing in two important respects. The amount of prejudice directed against blacks was greater than that directed against other groups and the internal communal strengths of blacks were less. Handlin felt that blacks were weaker in communal voluntary organizations, in community business, and that they were less aware of the importance of political participation.

Glazer and Moynihan further modified the basic assumptions of the assimilation model.<sup>27</sup> They no longer assumed that the tendency was for minorities to become completely assimilated into the dominant society. The first edition of *Beyond the Melting Pot* argued that minorities would become integrated within racial and religious groupings but that race and religion would continue to provide the basis for distinct social groupings. The second edition suggested that ethnicity was re-emerging in importance while race and religion were receiving decreasing emphasis in modern American society. Glazer and Moynihan continued the trend begun by Handlin of shifting the locus of responsibility for lack of black assimilation from majority group prejudice to minority group deficiencies.

It had been assumed initially by Glazer and Moynihan that blacks would achieve full legal and civil equality. It was argued that all previous minorities had started at the bottom, had moved up without massive governmental help, and that no institutional racism existed to prevent blacks from doing likewise. Glazer and Moynihan acknowledge the existence of prejudice but argue that all previous groups also faced prejudice and managed to overcome it. They suggested that any failure of blacks to make significant progress was largely the consequence of their own deficiencies. Blacks tended to perceive actual gains as psychologi-



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cal losses and consequently to develop a sense of deprivation and impending doom. They failed to take advantage of political opportunities by refusing to register and vote in sufficient numbers. They did not develop the economic or leadership strength that results from a strong minority involvement in business. They failed to develop the strong self-help community organizations that were essential if defects in black family structure and black education were to be overcome. The opportunities existed but blacks failed to take advantage of them. True discrimination remained but other minorities had continued to prepare themselves and were ready to seize opportunities when barriers were lowered. Blacks are not doing this. What is worse, blacks have turned to a separatist rhetoric that alienates their white friends and tends to close doors that would be open to an assimilationist-oriented black population. More would have been gained if they had chosen to identify themselves as an ethnic group rather than a racial minority.

It is difficult to find in the writings of the assimilationist school any indication that European immigrants were brought to the United States because the dominant economic class could profit by their importation in the same manner that this class profited by the importation of Africans. There are important differences between the importation of Europeans and Africans but there are also significant similarities. Africans were imported to fill the need for cheap controllable labor generated by the developing plantation system just as European immigrants were imported to fill the need for cheap controllable labor generated by developing industries. Each was brought to America because members of a particular class, differing racially or culturally from the immigrants, found it profitable. This is not basically different from the colonial situation created by European incursions around the world in search of markets, labor, and raw materials. In each case institutionalized systems of superordination—subordination emerge to facilitate exploitation and receive their ideological justification through the development of a system of racist beliefs.

All of this escaped the attention of the assimilationist school, as does the role of prejudice in dividing exploited groups into mutually hostile racial and ethnic camps. This succeeds in weakening the exploited and facilitating the perpetuation of a small class in a position of power and privilege. The concept “exploitation” is almost totally absent from the writings of the assimilationists. They ignore the fact that exploitation is the driving force behind race and ethnic relations. Their refusal to con-

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front the central issues leads to a concern with the process of cultural assimilation. The assimilationists cannot ignore the fact that racial groups tend to remain somewhat separate from, and in an inferior position to, the dominant society, even after cultural differences are removed. The attempt to explain this has led to a concern with similarities and differences between blacks and European ethnic groups.

Irving Kristol agrees with Moynihan and Glazer that blacks today are essentially the same as ethnic immigrants of earlier periods.<sup>28</sup> While blacks are old Americans, they have only recently migrated to cities and face the same problems confronting earlier immigrants. They start at the bottom with the least desirable jobs and residential areas but may be expected to repeat the cycle of skill acquisition, movement up the occupational ladder, improved incomes and migration away from the ghettos. Any failure to do so is not the result of majority group prejudice because this attitude confronted all immigrant groups. Glazer charges that blacks and poor whites today are simply not willing to do the kind of hard and/or demeaning work that immigrants gladly did a generation ago in order to get the first leg up the ladder.<sup>29</sup> Nor are blacks willing to work to prepare themselves for opportunities that may not be readily apparent but are nevertheless real.

The Kerner Commission shared the basic premise that blacks are recent immigrants to the cities but argued that the situation has changed.<sup>30</sup> European immigrants arrived in the United States at the time of an expanding economy and much of their collective progress resulted from changes in the occupational structure. Blacks are moving into the cities at a time when the economy is mature and the opportunities earlier available to white immigrants have disappeared. Greatly increased levels of education are required for even the least desirable jobs. The cities themselves have changed. They are no longer growing and expanding. Immigrants gained control over cities with budgets that could be used for group progress. Blacks are gaining control over cities that are bankrupt. The Kerner Commission concluded that blacks are recent immigrants to the cities but they are faced with greater prejudice and fewer opportunities than any previous immigrant group.

This debate is misleading because it concerns itself with the wrong questions. Attention is directed away from the central fact that blacks and European immigrants were both brought to the United States to fill a need for cheap exploitable labor and each has been exploited ever since. Any approach that fails to begin with an analysis of exploitation