

Why Liberals Separate Race from Class

The tendency to divorce racial disparities from economic inequality has a long liberal lineage.

by Touré F. Reed



Demonstrators in the June 1968 Poor People's March in Washington, DC. Warren K. Leffler / Library of Congress

After shutting down a Bernie Sanders speech at a Seattle rally for Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, Black Lives Matter activist Marissa Johnson declared to MSNBC's Tamron Hall that she was motivated by a desire to hold liberal candidates accountable.

This is more than understandable. Despite boosting progressives' expectations, President Obama has continued to prosecute a shadowy global "war on terror," undermined public education by promoting charter schools, and reneged on promises to organized labor for the Employee Free Choice Act ([EFCA](#)) and to the American public for a truly universal health care system.

All this has certainly made clear the importance of holding putative liberals to their rhetoric, even for someone as young as Johnson, whose progressive political awakening only dates back to Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012 at the hands of sociopathic vigilante George Zimmerman.

On some level, then, Johnson's circumspection about Sanders and Gov. Martin O'Malley (no word on Clinton) could be considered encouraging, even if her decision to hijack the Sanders rally falls somewhere between arrogant (she represents no constituency to speak of) and politically misguided — many black lives, including both of my grandmothers', have benefited greatly from Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid for decades.

If we could chalk up Johnson's actions in Seattle to youthful hubris, this incident could be easily dismissed. However, as the interview on MSNBC continued, Johnson laid out a problematic perspective that has spread through the universe of activists, political operatives, and pundits plugged into Black Lives Matter.

Johnson cast Sanders's perspective as that of "basically a class reductionist." She went on to say, "[Sanders] never really had a strong analysis that there is racism and white supremacy that is separate than the economic things that everyone experiences."

The horizontal organization of Black Lives Matter ensures a diversity of perspectives among participants and even branches. Nevertheless, the now-commonplace claim at the heart of the recent Black Lives Matter protests against Sanders is that white liberals have long reduced racism to class inequality in order to deflect attention from racial disparities.

This is not just wrong, but the formulation — which ultimately treats race as unchanging and permanent rather than a product of specific historical and political economic relations — undermines both the cause of racial equality in general and pursuit of equitable treatment in the criminal justice system in particular.

Indeed, Sanders is more likely to draw links between economic inequality generally and racial disparities in employment, housing, wealth and incarceration than President Carter, the Clintons, or even President Obama.

However, liberals have actually tended to *divorce* racial disparities from economic inequality for longer than Marissa Johnson, the founders of Black Lives Matter, or even I have been alive. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, for example, traced the ultimate source of the high rates of black poverty and unemployment (which were roughly twice that of whites') to what some today would call systemic racism.

According to Moynihan, however, "the racist virus that . . . afflicts all of us" set in motion a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty and dependence that all but ensured that neither economic opportunity nor anti-discrimination policies alone would be able to close the income and employment gap between blacks and whites.

By the late 1980s, Moynihan's dystopian vision — which presumed that African-American poverty had taken on a life of its own, making it nearly impervious to economic intervention — had become liberal orthodoxy.

While centrist liberals like Presidents Clinton and Obama have encouraged conversations about race and have been willing to concede that racism can undercut the life chances of blacks and Latinos, they are more likely to trace poverty and inequality to the habits, attitudes, and culture of the poor than to the disastrous effects of labor or trade policies or even the health of a particular sector of the economy.

Sanders is thus more likely to draw attention to the linkages between racism and class exploitation than the sitting Democratic president or other presidential contenders, not because he is a liberal — like centrist liberals Carter, the Clintons, or Obama — but because he is, by today's narrow standards, a leftist.

Situating Sanders's leftism in the proper historical frame is key to understanding the myopia that shapes some Black Lives Matter activists' criticism of him. The Sanders program — Medicare for all, a living wage, the right to collective bargaining, fair trade policies, free public higher education, etc. — sounds a lot less like the dictatorship of the proletariat than New Deal labor-liberalism.

And it's New Deal-era *black politics* specifically — and what followed — that demonstrates the fundamental problem with the tendency of some activists, like Johnson, to treat race as “its own thing,” distinct from class inequality.

Many contemporary activists, broadly defined, are quick to dismiss as racist deflection any attempts to view racial disparities through the lens of class inequality, but in the 1930s and 1940s mainstream African-American civil rights leaders — among them Lester Granger of the National Urban League, Walter White of the NAACP, John P. Davis of the National Negro Congress, and of course A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) — frequently argued that precisely because most blacks were working class, racial equality could only be achieved through a combination of anti-discrimination policies *and* social-democratic economic policies.

But by the 1950s, the anticommunism of the Cold War had a chilling effect on class-oriented civil rights politics, setting the stage for analyses of racism that divorced prejudice from economic exploitation — the fundamental reason for slavery and Jim Crow. Indeed, this was the era in which racism was recast as a psychological affliction rather than a product of political economy.

As McCarthyism receded by the end of the 1950s, however, mainstream black civil rights leaders once again identified economic opportunity for all — decent-paying jobs and social-democratic policies — as essential to racial equality.

The black organizers of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (it is telling that “Jobs and Freedom” are no longer part of collective reflections of the march), Randolph and Bayard Rustin — both of them socialists — were very clear about this.

Randolph — who more than twenty years earlier used the threat of a march on the nation's capital to wrest the Fair Employment Practices Committee, a workplace anti-discrimination board, from President Franklin D. Roosevelt — asserted his continued support for a Fair Employment Practices Act, or what would eventually be known as affirmative action.

Still, even as Randolph was motivated by disparities in unemployment and income, he stated explicitly that anti-discrimination measures alone would do little to redress black poverty and unemployment which, he said, had less to do with racism or discrimination (which were certainly alive and thriving in 1963) than automation, mechanization, and deindustrialization.

One has to wonder if those who think Sanders got what was coming to him at Netroots Nation and in Seattle would today cast Randolph (Negro American Labor Council), along with Rustin, Whitney Young (National Urban League), Roy Wilkins (NAACP), John Lewis (SNCC), James Farmer (CORE), and Martin Luther King Jr (SCLC) as vulgar class reductionists.

This is why the March on Washington demands included not just anti-discrimination measures, but a full-employment economy, jobs programs, and a minimum-wage increase. Randolph and Rustin would go on to ally with economist Leon Keyserling to draft the 1966 Freedom Budget For All, which laid out a plan for social-democratic policies addressing black poverty by confronting its ultimate source — the erosion of well-paying jobs for low-skilled workers that had once served as the pathway to the middle class for white people.

To be sure, black Americans did not share in the fruits of those jobs on an equal basis with whites between 1940 and 1953, and racism had a lot to do with that. But it should be noted that this period witnessed the biggest expansion in economic growth — meaning the racial income and employment gap closed substantially — that African Americans had ever seen.

Regardless, these well-paying jobs for low-skilled workers were not going away after 1954 because of racism; they were disappearing, as Randolph et al, argued, because of deindustrialization.

Even during the debates over affirmative action in the early 1960s, mainstream black leaders were clear that anti-discrimination measures *alone* were insufficient.

Most had initially supported the anti-discrimination bill put up by Sen. Hubert Humphrey (S-1937), which was wedded to a comprehensive jobs program. That, however, was deemed too ambitious and swept aside in favor of what we got: Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

From Richard Nixon forward, the view that racism is inextricably linked to economic exploitation began a steady slide into oblivion, both because of the conservative turn in American politics generally and the limits of Black Power ideology that, ironically, meshed with the conservative turn.

The growing acceptance of the view that racism was *distinct* from economic inequality and capitalist exploitation set the stage for underclass ideology and ultimately the paradox of the Clinton presidency. Clinton, though popular with black voters, did quite a bit to undermine the material wellbeing of black Americans.

NAFTA (outside of construction, blacks are overrepresented among trade unionists, and trade unionists are overrepresented within the black middle class), the Omnibus Crime Act, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, and HOPE VI (the federal housing initiative that demolished public housing for the poor in favor of private, upscale “mixed income” developments, which ultimately displaced poor residents to the four winds) all had a disproportionately negative impact on blacks because they targeted poor and working-class people.

But despite the fact that these policies likely hurt African Americans more than any other racial demographic, Bill Clinton was and remains very popular with black people because he went to African-American churches and had black friends. This framework *only* works if one sees racism and economic marginality as two separate things — the worldview endorsed by Marissa Johnson and a host of liberal pundits, from Salon to MSNBC.

For that matter, President Obama's "Race to the Top" and Mayor Rahm Emanuel's war on the Chicago Teachers Union have had a disproportionately negative impact on the African-American middle class because teachers are a vital part of the black middle class. And since the same can be said of public-sector employees generally, any official who calls for cuts to the public sector like Gov. Scott Walker is undercutting the black middle and working classes.

Sanders is therefore no more a class reductionist than the black leaders of the modern civil rights movement. And frankly, he and others who call for viewing racial disparities through the lens of neoliberal class warfare are often *less* guilty of deflection than those who suggest that racism and class exploitation occupy distinct terrain.

In separating the problem of police brutality from political economy, many activists — like, ironically, the liberal as opposed to left approach to racial inequality — not only undercut the opportunity for broader political alliances and perhaps some meaningful victories, but sidestep the same crucial point about police brutality that both liberals and conservatives look past.

Shortly after Michael Brown's murder at the hands of Officer Darren Wilson, conservative radio talk show personality Michael Medved questioned the merits of the protests in Ferguson, MO by arguing that the majority of victims of police brutality are white, even if blacks are overrepresented. In Medved's view, black whiners and guilty white liberals have exaggerated the pervasiveness of police misconduct, deflecting attention from the real problem African Americans face: so-called black-on-black crime.

While most people killed by police are indeed white, Medved's claims proceeded from a narrow racist framework that not only misrepresented the issues, but exhibited a similar disregard for political economy that some Black Lives Matter activists have displayed when discussing police brutality.

Specifically, there have been many publicized instances in which whites have been victims of police brutality or even egregious acts of prosecutorial misconduct (known as "railroading"). Of course, the white victims of blatant misconduct and abuse are disproportionately poor and working class.

Examples include: James Boyd, the unarmed white homeless man murdered by Albuquerque police last March; Ryan Keith Bolinger, the unarmed white high school graduate and state fair groundskeeper killed by police in Des Moines, IA this June; and Damien Echols, Jessie Misskelley, and Jason Baldwin — the teenaged trailer park residents known as the West Memphis Three — who were convicted on bogus evidence in a set of horrific murders before finally being released from prison in 2011 after more than eighteen years.

While black victims of police brutality obviously run the class gamut, the reality is that African-American victims of police excess are likewise disproportionately poor and working class.

According to some Sanders critics, the Sandra Bland tragedy makes clear that race is not reducible to class. As Thegrio.com's Joy Reid asserted on a July 21 appearance on MSNBC's The Ed Show, "being gainfully employed . . . in Texas did not stop [Sandra Bland] from winding up dead." Reid — like fellow guests Georgetown University Professor Michael Eric Dyson and former Ohio State Sen. and friend to the Clintons Nina Turner — questioned the relevance of O'Malley's and Sanders's focus on economic inequality to black Americans.

While there is no denying that a job did not insulate Bland from police misconduct, abuse of power, or even negligence on the part of corrections officers, it is worth considering here that the purpose of race in origin and its ongoing function today was and is to denote one's socioeconomic status as well as one's value as a laborer. From the start "negro" and eventually "colored" were essentially shorthand for highly exploitable laborers who, by the second third of the nineteenth century, were deemed to possess distinct, innate traits that made them uniquely suited to perform "bad jobs" — the most obvious example being slave labor.

Eventually, and this includes today, those alleged traits were also what made African Americans uniquely "qualified" for mass unemployment and incarceration. For people we might call racists, "black" and "African American" — despite changes in nomenclature — remain shorthand for "poor person" and/or "bad worker" today. Thus even in the mind of the average racist, race and class are inextricably linked.

One result of this reality is that irrespective of black people's individual accomplishments — and this is one of the things that makes the Bland case seem especially tragic — African Americans are often treated by “less than enlightened” workers in the criminal justice system, prospective employers, supervisors, school administrators, etc. in much the same way that poor white people are: as morally disreputable, intellectually suspect, and potentially dangerous.

If one views the excesses and failures of the criminal justice system solely through the lens of race, then victims of police brutality and prosecutorial misconduct tend to be black or Latino. However, if one understands race and class are inextricably linked, then the victims of police brutality are not simply black or Latino (and Latinos outnumber blacks in federal prisons at this point) but they tend to belong to groups that lack political, economic, and social influence and power.

From that vantage point, the worldview expressed by Johnson and others misses the mark and falls into the same trap that, ironically, liberals have offered a stratum of credentialed black Americans for decades: opportunity within a market-driven political and economic framework that disparages demands for social and economic justice for all (including *most* black people) as socialist, communist, un-American, or even class-reductionist.

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